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**RURAL POVERTY IN NEPAL:  
ISSUES, PROBLEMS, AND PROSPECTS**

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**RURAL POVERTY IN NEPAL:  
ISSUES, PROBLEMS, AND PROSPECTS**

Dilli R. Dahal\*

**INTRODUCTION**

**The Problem**

Nepal has always been considered a poor country (ARTEP, 1974). The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1972), using a number of economic and social indicators, identified Nepal as one of the least developed and poorest countries in the world. Similar views have been expressed by many scholars (Eckholm, 1976; NPC, 1977; Blaikie et al., 1980; Jain, 1981). Except for Macfarlane (1976) and Dahal (1983), some of the microlevel anthropological studies have also accepted the image of poverty in Nepal people without critically examining the available resource base and the various adaptive mechanisms (Caplan, 1970; Caplan, 1972). Nonetheless, important research questions still remain--are the existing sources of data helpful in assessing the problem of rural poverty in Nepal? To what extent are Nepalese people poor? What are the indices commonly used to measure rural poverty in Nepal?

It is thus particularly crucial that a critical examination be undertaken of existing data sources on poverty in Nepal and the way they are used. With these goals, the present study has the following objectives.

1. Review research on poverty in Nepal for a critical assessment of the problem.
2. Assess the role of landlessness and small landholdings in rural poverty.
3. Assess food consumption patterns and other social services available to people in measuring rural poverty.
4. Outline a framework of the determinants of rural poverty.
5. Suggest policy recommendations for future research.

**Conceptual Issues in Defining Poverty**

The concept of poverty is as old as human history. However, it was Malthus (1798) who first seriously recognized and made a major contribution in revealing the causes and consequences of poverty. Poverty, to Malthus, is mainly the result of insufficient human restraint in reproduction. His views were latter seriously questioned by Marx and others. To Marx (1859); poverty is the result of

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exploitative economic institutions. Since then the subject has been fraught with ideological overtones and serious conceptual issues have been raised in defining poverty.

One of the problems is defining the term poverty itself. The concept of poverty differs from one nation to another and from one culture to another. Bangladesh, for example, provides an ideal test case of a desperately poor country where parents show a remarkable reluctance to limit the size of their families. Cain's in-depth study (1977) of a poor village in Bangladesh suggests that male children represent a means of supplementing income and accumulating wealth within their parents' lifetime. Similarly, in the case of Indonesia and India, Hull (1975) and Mamdani (1972) have argued that parents of small families are perceived as being poor. In the Philippines, landlessness is not equated with poverty. As for Nepal, Dahal (1983) demonstrates that the people of Pipalbote cluster are moving towards prosperity rather than poverty despite a land shortage and grain deficit in the cluster. Oscar Lewis (1965) shows that chronic poverty persists at the family level in Puerto Rico because of the world views and aspirations which are developed within a feudalistic-capitalistic socioeconomic structure. Briefly, the concept is embedded not only in the level of income and life style of people, but also the social norms, cultural values, and philosophy of life.

#### Economic versus Cultural Framework of Poverty

In general, two radically different approaches are followed by researchers toward understanding poverty. In the first, the terms of poverty are based on economic principles, and are defined by a person's capacity in economic transactions--buying items for consumption, and selling productive services. This definition of poverty measures the extent of a person's poverty according to the level of total income. This economic theory is propagated by scholars such as Watts (1968), Rosenthal (1968), Dandekar and Rath (1971), and various international organizations.

In the second approach, the poverty is framed under the concept of the "culture or subculture of poverty." This can be labelled as the sociocultural theory of poverty. This concept is developed by Oscar Lewis (1965), in a masterful anthropological study of poverty within a Puerto Rican family. Lewis tries to understand poverty and its associated traits--economic, social, and psychological--as forming a culture. He believes that the culture of poverty grows and flourishes in societies having the following set of conditions:

- a cash economy, wage labor, and production for profit;
- a persistently high rate of unemployment and underemployment for unskilled labor;
- low wages;
- the failure to provide social, political and economic organization either on a voluntary basis or by government imposition for the low income population;

- a bilateral kinship system rather than a unilineal one;
- in the dominant class of a set of values that stresses the accumulation of wealth and property, the possibility of upward mobility, and thrift--all of which "explain" low economic status as the result of personal inadequacy or inferiority (Lewis, 1968).

Both assumptions of poverty have some drawbacks. In the economic analysis of poverty, the major problem lies in measuring the "income" of people. Despite meticulous statistical exercises in calculating the incomes of people at the national level, much of the economic literature does not address the internal functioning of the household. It is difficult to derive reliable income data even at the household/village level unless an in-depth study is undertaken. In the rural setting, hundreds of families may have no land and nothing to sell at the market, yet maintain a relatively good standard of living with adequate food supplies. In particular, this approach neglects the microframework of poverty and assumes all forms of poverty as similar regardless of the macroeconomic, social and cultural contexts.

This is not always true for many of the developing countries whose subsistence is based entirely on the noncash sector. In this context, one should be careful in assessing rural poverty, considering people's environment, utilization of resources, and what people consider an adequate diet.

The weakness of the culture of poverty approach lies in defining those cultural traits which make a person poor. These traits are not universal and the relationships between them vary between societies and from family to family. Historical writings suggest that in preindustrial Europe, there were many classes of people which ranged from destitutes, vagabonds, laborers, serfs, freemen, clergymen, gentry, and above. Similarly, in the Hindu caste social structure, people are categorized into Brahmins, Chhetris, Vaisyas, and Sudras. These groups or classes of people really reflect not only the social but also economic hierarchies.

The important question still remains: do these cultural traits or heritages interfere with people's ability to exploit new economic opportunities? For example, Harizans remain poor in India not because of the lack of economic opportunities but because of the immutable hierarchical caste framework of the Indian society. Regarding Lewis' approach, Harizans do not fall into his concept of culture of poverty because they are integrated into the larger Hindu society, have their own caste organization to uplift themselves economically, and have higher aspirations for living.

#### Poverty Indices

The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1972) presents a number of economic and demographic characteristics of least developed countries, including GNP, GDP, the share of manufacture, share in total production, and the adult literacy rate of the total population. But most of these characteristics depict the macroframework of poverty without considering various microeconomic parameters operating at the local level. On the other hand, it is not

easy to collect all of these data at one time while assessing rural poverty. In India, various indices have been used to measure poverty. For Dandekar and Rath (1971), land, per capita daily consumption of food, and annual per capita consumption/expenditure are the major indices for measuring poverty. Morris and Michael (1982) had difficulty measuring the condition of India's poor through these measures, so they used only three indices--infant mortality, life expectancy at birth, and basic literacy--which comprise a physical quality of life index for Indian people. In some cases the poverty of India is assessed while looking at energy consumption data in both cities and rural areas (NCAER, 1980). A discussion of indices used in measuring poverty with their relative merits and weaknesses follows.

GNP/Per Capita Income. In GNP calculations, various goods and services are priced locally and converted into American dollars at official exchange rates. However, an Indian or Nepalese rupee can buy more consumer goods locally than can an American dollar. When the purchasing power of a rupee is indexed into the equivalent dollar, the existing GNP of a country may rise three to four times times. A World Bank report (1977) writes:

GNP provides only an approximate measure of economic conditions and trends. They are merely rough indicators of the absolute state of poverty in the developing world.

In reality, the GNP is a very crude way of measuring the economic prosperity of a nation. Unfortunately, GNP has become one of the most common indices of poverty throughout the developing world. At the same time, it is difficult to calculate GNP in developing countries like Nepal where very few commodities come to the market from the rural areas. Statistics of national income seriously underestimate many of the nonmonetized activities operating at the household/community level. Briefly, poverty cannot only be equated with a certain level of income.

Calorie Consumption and Poverty. The other common index utilized in measuring poverty is the general food intake and calorie consumption. This measure simplifies the picture of food consumption. Food intake differs not only between children, women, men, and old people, but also between ethnic groups and individuals according to different activities (Dahal, 1983). Within the household, food is not distributed or consumed in proportion to the needs of the different members of the family. In many Hindu households, food is served first to the male members, then children and finally to the women. In some situations women receive only a small share of food at the end and are the major sufferers. In other words, it is difficult to reveal the extent of undernourishment or minimal calorie consumption even at the household level unless an in-depth study is carried out to understand the food situation and consumption patterns of people.

Fertility. The question here is whether the poor produce more children per couple than do the rich. There is an assumption that the poor always breed faster than the rich, but this is not always supported by the available fertility data. Wealth, particularly landholding, is directly associated with fertility. Wealthy families who own a large amount of land, have a larger number of children compared to poor families (Mamdani, 1972; Hull, 1975). In addition, the data

indicate that the age at menarche tends to fall as living standards rise and the menarche is delayed among the undernourished poor (Chaudhary et al., 1977). In other words, data from many developing countries show an inverse relationship between poverty and high fertility.

Infant Mortality. A high rate of infant mortality is also associated with poor societies. Poor couples have the least access to medical facilities, better food, accommodations, and there is a higher rate of infant mortality among them. On the other hand, recent infant mortality data in Soviet Union suggest that poverty is not always the precondition of infant deaths (Jones and Grupp, 1983). While comparing the mortality data of two Indian states, Moni Nag (1983) found that Kerala, a poorer state than West Bengal, has lower infant mortality rates at all income levels. So it is important to consider the distributional aspects of development in an area while considering the relationship between poverty and infant mortality.

Education and Poverty. Educational level is frequently viewed as an important element in the determination of one's socioeconomic status and level of poverty. The literacy rate is easy to calculate. However, a high literacy rate does not mean that the country is rich, as shown by many Persian Gulf and Arab countries. Similarly, Kerala (India) has very high male and female literacy rates, although it is one of poorest states of India. So, while discussing the poverty it is necessary to consider the distribution of basic necessities and people's access to the them.

#### RESEARCH ON POVERTY IN NEPAL

This section assesses research on poverty in Nepal, examining various dimensions of poverty using both micro and macrolevel data.

##### Studies of Nepalese Poverty

It is sad to point out that although the problem of poverty in Nepal has been well recognized since the First Five-Year Plan (1956-60), the research on poverty in Nepal is minimal compared to that of India and Bangladesh. There are more than 160 books and research reports written on poverty in Bangladesh (Zakira and Akhter, 1983). Except for Okada and Rana (1973), the Asian Team for Regional Employment Promotion (ARTEP, 1974), the National Planning Commission (NPC, 1977), Macfarlane (1976), Jain (1981), Dahal (1983), Baskota (1983), and Singh (1983), who discuss some aspects of poverty, there is virtually no research which specifically deals with issue of rural poverty in Nepal. The household expenditure data are minimal (except those prepared by the Nepal Rastra Bank), and there are only a few studies which contrast the urban/rural poverty situation in Nepal (CBS, 1974, 1975, 1978; Zevering, 1974). Below is a review of some of the poverty studies conducted in Nepal with an assessment of their objectives.

The Child Beggars of Kathmandu (Okada and Rana). This study was a survey of beggary in the Kathmandu Valley. A total of 780 beggars were interviewed, of whom 149 were children. Though the objective of the study was not clearly defined, the authors wanted to present information on various aspects of children's conditions in Nepal. Three main reasons for begging were identified: poor physical condition (2.7

percent), poor economic condition (5.3 percent), and social reasons (92 percent). The study clearly shows that poor economic condition is not the major reason for begging; social conditions, such as the death of parents, forces children to beg in the Kathmandu Valley.

The Challenge for Nepal (ARTEP). This report was prepared by a committee of the International Labor Organization. The researchers conducted a survey in western Nepal and also relied heavily on the 1961 and 1971 Nepalese census data. The report provides much economic data, focusing on the unemployment situation. The thrust of the report is "Nepal is a poor country and daily becoming poorer." The major weakness of the report is its heavy reliance on census and survey data without sufficient in-depth socioeconomic analysis of the study area.

A Survey of Employment, Income Distribution, and Consumption Patterns in Nepal (NPC). This survey, conducted by the National Planning Commission, The survey covered ten town panchayats (932 urban families) and 128 village panchayats (4037 families) in 37 districts of Nepal. The report provides data on employment, underemployment and unemployment, levels of income, income disparities, pattern and level of consumer expenditure, relation of consumption with income and occupation, as well as the magnitude and concentration of poverty. This survey report represents a study of poverty at the national level.

Though the survey is very comprehensive and useful, it also relies heavily on data which were collected during a short period of time. The report itself admits to many sampling and nonsampling errors. The survey does not incorporate findings of the numerous microlevel studies conducted in the area to support the macropicture of poverty. Many of the tabulated figures do not explain how data were actually collected, how reliable they are, and to what extent the data generally depict the picture of poverty in Nepal.

Poverty to Prosperity in Nepal (Jain). This book discusses poverty in Nepal in general and suggests some long-term policies. The findings of the book are based on secondary data. Jain has proposed two categories of poor people in Nepal: "the poorest of the poor" and "those above the poverty line poor."

The poorest of the poor are those whose per capita daily income is below NRs.2 (at 1977 values), and whose daily food consumption is less than 1750 calories. The poor above the poverty line are those whose daily income ranges from NRs.2.00 to 2.68. The former group number 4.50 million (36.2 percent of the population), and the latter, 2.34 million (18.8 percent), totalling 6.84 million (55.0 percent) poor people in Nepal in 1977. Ninety-seven percent of the total poor are concentrated in rural areas. Jain predicts the number of poor people will increase 7.98 million (60.2 percent) in 1980, and to 10.29 million (69.2 percent) in 1985.

The key issue here is not how Jain elegantly presents poverty in Nepal, but how such data are collected and utilized in assessing the poverty situation in Nepal. Even if we believe that his assumptions are reliable, who are these 55 percent people? To which cultural group do they belong? Why they are poor?

Resources and Population: A Study of the Gurungs of Nepal (Macfarlane). This is a detailed microlevel village study of 100 households by an anthropologist. The field work was conducted in the Thak village in western Nepal which was settled predominantly by Gurung population. The focus of the study is to show the interrelationship between resources and population over a period of time. Macfarlane presents detailed data on land ownership, capital holdings, food consumption, firewood consumption, and population structure with accounts on fertility, mortality, and migration of the population. Considering the current population growth and resource situation, the book presents a gloomy future for the Gurung population within Thak village.

On the other hand, the current economic condition of the Gurungs is relatively good compared to many South Asian communities. The author believes that the Gurungs of Thak are one of the most prosperous groups in South Asia in terms of diet and capital holdings. The population growth rate is barely one percent per year. The infant mortality rate is only 71 per thousand.

Departing from Macfarlane, population pressure on resources is a dynamic, not a static phenomenon. The Gurungs of Thak will still be better off economically in the near future if they adapt to their changing situation.

Foreign Aid and the Poor: Some Observations on Nepal's Experience (Baskota). This article discusses the relationship between foreign aid and poverty in Nepal. The author critically examines several foreign aided projects whose objective was to raise the socioeconomic conditions of the rural poor. Baskota concludes that the rural poor have only minimally benefitted from these foreign aided development projects.

A Review of Nepal's Efforts in Poverty Alleviation (Singh). This volume is one of an in-depth series published by the Food and Agriculture Organization in connection with poverty issues in various parts of south and southeast Asia. Singh reviews agriculture, ownership of land, productivity, food, income, employment, and access to public services in Nepal, and evaluates the government's efforts in poverty alleviation programs.

On the whole, these studies on poverty do not give a complete picture because of a lack of a conceptual framework on poverty, and the way in which data are analyzed in assessing rural poverty in Nepal. Nevertheless, these studies demonstrate that while data on rural poverty are scarce in Nepal, several micro and macrolevel studies exist which provide data on food, people, land, and income.

#### DIMENSIONS OF POVERTY IN NEPAL

Who the Nepalese poor are is a complex question, however a broad generalization can be made that the poor are predominately rural. This section examines some of the indices commonly used to measure poverty.

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Table 1. Farm Holding and Distribution after 1964 Land Reform

Size of holdings (ha)	Households (percent)	Area (percent)
Less than 1	53.5	10.5
1 - 3	19.5	18.0
3 - 5	7.1	12.0
5 - 10	5.8	21.0
10 - 15	2.1	11.0
15 - 20	0.9	7.0
20 - 30	0.5	5.5
30 and above	0.6	15.0

Source: M. A. Zaman, Evaluation of Land Reform in Nepal, (Kathmandu: His Majesty's Government, 1972).  
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Two major conclusions can be drawn from these data. First, more than half of the households in Nepal held less than one hectare of land which may not support the growing population. Second, if this was the situation of landownership in Nepal after 1964, the situation should have been worse before that. Regmi (1976) has demonstrated that most of the land in Nepal was held by a few landlords, upper class people and institutions. Land was kept in various forms of land tenure, through individuals or the state. The common people were either landless or mostly tenants and sharecroppers.

Furthermore, there is a marked disparity in landholding between the hills, Tarai, and Kathmandu Valley. Based on the cadastral land survey of 1971, the average land holding size in different regions of Nepal was 1.28 ha. per cultivator in the Tarai, 1.22 in the hills, and 0.086 in Kathmandu (MLR, 1978).

The limited Rural Household Survey conducted by ARTEP gives a different picture. The ARTEP survey found that 23 percent of the households in Tarai possessed no land compared with one percent in hill villages. In Nepal, 10.3 percent of the total rural households are landless (NPC, 1977). In other words, although the hill region of Nepal has greater equality in terms of landholding, many people living in the hills are poorer than in the Tarai and Kathmandu. This is because of the average farm income is highest in Kathmandu and lowest in the hills.

#### Landownership

The micropicture of landownership in Nepal is not encouraging. The available landownership data of some of the villages of Nepal is given in Table 2.

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 Table 2. Landownership in Several Nepalese Villages

Area	Year Data Collected	Average holding in Ropani (percent)		
		Less than 5	5 - 10	More than 10
Thak	1965	20.6	10.9	64.9
Sallyan	1967	14.0	36.0	50.0
Doti	1967	44.0	26.0	30.0
Pipalbote	1981	6.0	1.00	93.0
Ratmate	1985	22.0	16.0	62.0

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The above data show that small landholdings are the rule in a considerable number of households. Except for Pipalbote, the households who own less than 0.5 ha. range from 31 to 70 percent of the total households in the other four villages. Thus, both the micro and macro aspects of landownership data suggest that a majority of people held a minimal amount of land and the average family's output from the land may no longer provide subsistence throughout the year.

However, it is not easy to ascertain how much land is adequate to feed certain number of people. For example, about .63 acres are adequate to feed five to seven members of a family in Kathmandu, 3.8 to 5.0 acres are needed to feed the same number of people in Pipalbote, Ilam (Dahal, 1983). Similarly, in the Tarai, farms of 1.7 ha. appear too small to provide the average family even with its basic food requirements (Zevering, 1974). Productivity of land depends on many factors: land quality, available technology and capital, attitudes towards food, work ethics, as well as socioeconomic and political organization.

Considering the land tenure system in an historical perspective, there has always been unequal distribution of land and exploitative tenancy practices (Regmi, 1976, 1978). The Land Reform Program of 1964 released only 44,950 hectares of surplus land to be redistributed to poor tenants although the total was initially expected to be about 250,000 hectares. In total only 5968 hectares of land above the ceilings were confiscated (MLR, 1978). Similarly, the government's efforts to resettle the landless and poor families have also produced negative results as the spontaneously formed settlements are economically more rewarding to the people than the planned settlements of government (Ojha, 1982).

Furthermore, there is a great disparity in income between people. A World Development Report (1983) notes that the bottom 20 percent of the population had access to only 4.6 percent of the national income compared to 46.5 percent of the national income being shared by the top 20 percent in Nepal. An income survey of 4596 families (urban and rural) in Nepal shows that 61.3 percent of the families had annual incomes less than NRs.5000. Only 33.7 percent of the rural families had incomes above NRs.5000 compared to 58.0 percent of the urban families (NPC, 1977).

To sum up, landownership of people reflects poverty in a broader context. It is not, however, an accurate index for measuring poverty. If poverty must be viewed through landownership patterns, one should consider all aspects of land productivity. In addition, landownership should be analyzed in the perspective of the complex set of institutional structures and rules by which acquisition, holding, and operation of the land are regulated.

#### Food and Nutrition

Poverty is also associated with the level of food production and consumption. In the Nepalese context, however, is there really a shortage of food? Considering this question in an historical and macrolevel perspective, Nepal never actually had a shortage of food until the mid 1970s. Rawat (1974) notes that around the turn of the twentieth century, rice accounted for nearly 40 percent of Nepal's export to India, with mustard oil seed providing an additional 20 percent. Furthermore, data show that Nepal was one of the leading rice exporting countries in the world between 1960 and 1975. According to Gaige (1968), Nepal was fourth among the rice exporting nations in 1962, sixth in 1963, and fifth in 1965. In 1974/75, Nepal exported 986,312 quintals of rice and earned NRs.433,452,125 (APROSC, 1976).

In recent years, however, the food production figures of Nepal seem to be utterly hopeless. In 1981, the total grain production was only 3.9 million metric tons, an insufficient amount to adequately feed the growing population. A document of the National Planning Commission (1984) presents the following gloomy picture of Nepal's current food situation:

Food production has now reached a level where it cannot be deemed sufficient to meet the minimum nutritional needs of people. In the hill areas, food crisis is so rampant that it has almost an annual feature and the number of food deficit districts have been increasing in number.

Some Nepalese authors argue if the present trend of food production and population growth continues, the problem of hunger and poverty will be further aggravated--the major sufferers being people living in the mountains and hills where the population density is the highest (Dhital, 1974; Manandhar, 1979). Except for the Tarai districts, all the hill districts are short of food grains and the extent of food grains available ranged, according to the best estimate, from 263 days in the eastern hills, to 178 days in the central hills (World Bank, 1980). The Employment, Income Distribution, and Consumption Patterns (EIDC) survey of the National Planning Commission (1977) also suggests the proportion of the population below minimum subsistence level are the highest in the rural areas.

Table 3 shows that although grain deficits occur in all the villages, the more serious deficits are in the hills rather than in the Tarai. The production figures not only present a serious food situation in the hills but indicate an overall gloomy future for Nepal.

Table 3. Grain Supply in Several Nepalese Villages

Area and Data Collection Period	Households (percent)			
	Total Sample Households	Surplus Grains	Just Meeting Require- ments	Grain Deficit
Indreni Cluster, Ilam 1964-65 (Caplan)	99	29	8	63
Lumbini (n.d.), Ilam 1981 (Okada)	214	51	29	20
Pipalbote, Ilam 1981 (Dahal)	100	19	27	54
Ratmate, Tanahu 1985 (Dahal)	100	12	12	76

The Department of Food, Agriculture, and Marketing Services (DFAMS) (1977) provides information on food consumption at the national level. In Nepal, during 1971/72, the annual per capita cereal consumption was 169.57 kgs., and only 22 districts had cereal consumption levels of more than 190 kgs. For example, the per capita cereals consumption was 193.66 kgs. in Manang and 239.33 kgs. in Rasuwa, districts which are not only physically remote and but supposedly the least agriculturally productive districts in the whole kingdom. In contrast, the per capita cereals consumption was 133.11 kgs. in Jhapa, 94.13 kgs. in Saptari, 152.62 kgs. in Morang, and 124.82 kgs. in Sunsari, the most agriculturally the most productive districts in the country. If these data reflect the true cereal consumption situation, is there any need to improve the agricultural conditions in the hills and mountains? The DFAMS data do not present an accurate picture of cereal consumption in Nepal. As all the Tarai districts are grain surplus districts, it is safe to assume that the consumption of cereals must be higher in the Tarai than in the hills.

The estimation of cereals consumption is based on production data and the production figures are entirely based on the accounts of Junior Technical Assistants (JTA) some of whom hardly ever visit the their assigned village panchayat areas. Even if they do visit the villages, district production figures are based on a sample of only a few villages.

Dahal (1985) had some instructive experiences on the role of the market for intensifying agriculture in the Tanajhu District. Many farmers, who have good quality land (water is plentiful even during winter), have not yet started growing wheat. The simple reason is that there is no local market for wheat, and it is difficult carry it even to the nearest market center because of poor transportation facilities.

Actual Food Consumption. In the Pangma village of eastern Nepal, the average consumption of grain per person per year was 190 kgs. in 1981 (Bajracharya, 1980). In the Pipalbote cluster of Ilam, Dahal (1983) estimated an average consumption of 199 kgs. of grains per person per year. Similarly, a yearly consumption of 210 kgs. of

grain was reported by Macfarlane (1976) in Thak Village. Zevering (1974) notes that per capita cereal consumption in Kusa Devi (East Ward No.1) and Batule Chaur (Kaski) was 217 and 276 kgs., respectively.

Is this consumption level adequate to provide enough nutrition to the people? Following standards set by the United Nations,, the National Planning Commission (1978) estimated the daily requirements of grain to be 605 grams (220 kgs. per year), for an average of 2256 calories per day. Clark (1967) in a different context, mentioned that "contrary to general belief, it is quite possible for a man to live almost entirely on cereals." He believes that "minimum and maximum requirements of 1625 and 2012 calories per day can be met by the cereal consumption of 185-230 kgs./person/year." If this consumption level is considered sufficient, people in many villages of Nepal get adequate nutrition to sustain themselves.

In addition to grains, people also consume a variety of other foods, including milk and milk products, lentils, and vegetables. While surveying 18 villages throughout the kingdom, Worth and Shah (1969) found the nutritional standard of people in these villages adequate. The quantity and variety of food available locally not only supplied enough calories but also enough protein. They did not find any serious protein deficiency diseases, such as kwashiorkor.

The overall picture suggests a scarcity of food in Nepal. The grain production figure as a whole is not very encouraging. The mass deforestation in recent years is creating erosion and reducing the land's productivity. Furthermore, the problem is aggravated by the rapid annual population growth rate of more than two percent, which has caused a serious shrinkage of per capita landholding. Though many farmers are trying to alleviate the adverse food situation by intensifying agriculture, the result, is not encouraging because of other limiting factors in production.

On the other hand, although the village level data are too sketchy to generalize the overall food consumption situation in Nepal, they imply the food consumption situation is not as bad as it had been predicted. What is needed is not only more reliable data but also a greater number of in-depth village studies to show the exact relationship between food and poverty.

#### Labor Force and Employment

According to the censuses of 1952/54, 1961, 1971, and 1981, the economically active population (15-59 years old) in Nepal constituted 4.6 million, 5.1 million, 6.2 million, and 7.9 million of the total population, respectively. The projected population in this age group is estimated at 11.3 million by the year 2000. In Nepal, children of ten years and above can be considered economically active, as they perform many adult tasks. This further aggravates the active labor force situation in Nepal, and makes it difficult to determine the overall employment situation.

Census data show that almost all the economically active population are engaged in agriculture. The percentage of people engaged in agriculture increased from 93.4 per cent in 1952/54, to 93.8 percent

in 1961, and further increased to 94.4 percent in 1972. In 1981, however, this percentage has come down to 91.1 percent, a modest decrease in the past 30 years.

The secondary and tertiary sectors, such as service and commerce, provided few employment opportunities in 1981: only 4.6 percent and 1.6 percent people were engaged in these sectors, respectively. A negligible percentage of people were employed in administrative, professional, technical, and other related fields.

The EIDC survey (NPC, 1977) portrays a similar employment structure for Nepal. The survey notes that 79.4 percent people are engaged on farms, 6.9 percent as production labor/workers, 6.9 percent as clerical workers, 3.5 percent as sales workers, and 2.4 percent as service workers. The professional/technical workers constitute only 0.9 percent of the total population. Only 52.1 percent of the total population are employed, of which 55.2 percent are from the rural and 38.3 percent from the urban area.

It is also difficult to pinpoint how many people are fully employed, marginally employed, underemployed, or otherwise, in the urban and rural areas of Nepal. The findings of the EIDC survey (the only source at hand) indicate that as much as 63.1 percent and 44.7 percent of the people in the rural and urban areas are underemployed. Although a lot of people are only seasonally employed in the rural areas, many of the adults (particularly from the far-western regions) go outside of their villages to search for available seasonal jobs (Dahal et al., 1978; Seddon et al., 1979).

The data present a worrisome situation for the country. The employment opportunities outside of agriculture are minimal. On the other hand, a continuous increase of the labor force in agriculture without an increase in total cultivatable land is creating a severe underemployment situation and forced migration of people from the rural areas. The increasing number of porters throughout Nepal in recent years is merely a symptom of underdevelopment and poverty.

This problem is further aggravated by the uncontrolled flow of seasonal Indian laborers who compete with the Nepalese workers in every type of skilled and unskilled work (Dahal, 1978, Gurung et al., 1982). In Nepal, Indian workers are preferred because they are cheaper, skilled, and more submissive compared to their Nepali counterparts. This will eventually not only drain the resources of the country but will force the government to face a serious challenge from the unrest of young people in the immediate future. It is unlikely that government is able to invest enough capital to fulfill the demand for new jobs in the generations ahead.

#### Education

The socioeconomic condition of the country is also reflected in the level of education of its people. Historically, public education was almost nonexistent in the kingdom outside of the Kathmandu Valley. Before 1950, only about two percent of the country's adult population was literate, and less than one percent of school-age children attended school. Today, the situation has changed tremendously. There

has been a considerable improvement in the overall literacy of the population and a dramatic increase in the number of educational institutions over the years. In 1982/83, the third year of the Sixth-Plan, 73 percent of the children of primary school age were estimated to have gone to school (NPC, 1984). Literacy, which was only 13.9 percent in 1971, rose to 23.3 percent in 1981. Today, there is one university, more than 100 colleges (including private), 1031 high schools, 2964 middle schools, and 10,912 primary schools (CBS, 1984).

These data suggest that Nepal has made rapid progress in education in a short period of time. However, when compared to the literacy and educational developments of other South Asian countries, such as India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, this progress seems less significant, especially in the fields of technical and professional education.

In addition, in spite of a vigorous campaign for the national literacy program, the absolute number of literate people has not improved significantly over the years. In 1971, there were approximately 8.1 million literates, this number had increased to approximately 9.3 million in 1981. An important consideration here is that the overall improvement in literacy does not represent changing enrollment rates but the increases of population over a period of time.

There is also a wide gap in the enrollment ratio between the urban and rural areas. The 1981 Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) report mentions that 48.4 percent of the urban student-age population in the 10-14 age group were enrolled in 1981, compared to 25 percent in the corresponding age group in the rural areas. Similarly, a wide disparity exists between sexes regarding educational attainment. In 1981, the female literacy rate was only 12.0 percent compared to the 33.9 percent for males. Within female literates, a widening gap persists between the rural and urban areas. In 1981, the literacy of rural females was only 9.8 percent compared to 37.4 percent of the urban females. In Nepal, most of the higher educational institutions (technical and nontechnical) are located in the urban areas. Because of this privilege, the urban people always have an upper hand in education and receive almost all the scholarships and various educational benefits. This is bound to create pockets of intellectual groups within the country, exacerbating poverty in the rural areas.

Thus, the overall higher literacy rate in Nepal does not mean that the rural people have benefitted equally in education. In fact, this higher national literacy rate, among other things, can mainly be attributed to higher urban literacy. The problem of rural literacy is further compounded because of rapid population growth in rural areas, and the lack of alternative employment opportunities outside agriculture.

## Health

In terms of health services, Nepal is one of the poorest countries in the world. A country of 15 million people, Nepal had only 528 certified doctors, 506 nurses, 75 hospitals and 2993 hospital beds in 1981/82, (CBS, 1984). This gives the ratios of doctors, nurses, hospitals, and hospital beds to population as 1:28413, 1:29409, 1:29640,

1:200029, and 1:5013 respectively. In 1971, the doctor to population ratio was 1:38000 which suggests a slight improvement in this ratio by 1981. However, this ratio seems to be extremely inadequate when compared to the 1971 data of neighboring countries: Pakistan 1:8000, India 1:5000, and Sri Lanka 1:4500.

In Nepal, health services are concentrated in the urban areas, particularly Kathmandu. In Kathmandu, there are two large hospitals, one medical college hospital, one mental hospital, and one eye hospital. In 1971, nearly two-thirds of the doctors were concentrated in Kathmandu--this number is assumed to have increased after the opening of the three specialized hospitals after 1971.

Several studies show that the rural people of Nepal have the least access to health services and good drinking water facilities. Infants and children die prematurely because many rural couples are forced to seek treatment from local faith healers. One report observed that among the 6952 children surveyed in three districts (two in the hills, one in the Tarai), 4634 children (67 percent) reported morbidities. Of these, only 3300 conditions received treatment in clinics and hospitals (Pandey et al., 1980). Communicable and infectious diseases, such as diarrhea, cholera, and tuberculosis, are major killers of people in the rural areas even today.

Baskota (1983) has observed that in most of government and semigovernment village development programs, the poor have received only marginal benefits in education, health, drinking water, and employment. For example, in the Rasuwa-Nuwakot Development Project "money goes mainly to the traditional health services more than anything else as people are compelled to seek the help of local leaders." Similarly, in many of the drinking water projects, the benefits have not actually reached the needy and poor because of the domination of local elites (who are relatively rich) in all political posts.

The government is finding it very difficult to provide for the people's basic needs and the problem is going to get worse in the immediate future.

#### Demographic Measures

In Nepal, reliable demographic data are difficult to obtain; the problem is compounded by the lack of a vital registration system before 1976: This problem is even more acute when comparison of the urban and the rural demographic situations is attempted. Except for the CBS' demographic sample surveys (1974/75, 1976, and 1977/78) which provide some demographic measures on the urban and rural areas at the national level, research addressing the urban/rural demographic characteristics is virtually nonexistent.

The doubling time of the population in Nepal has shortened over the years. In 1911, the population was just 5.6 million, and increased to 11.5 million in 1971, a total doubling time of 60 years. However, the population which was just 8.2 million in 1952/54 became 15.1 million in 1981--a doubling time of only 30 years. The current growth rate of 2.6 percent per year will double the population within 26 years. This growth rate is really alarming considering available resources.

Similarly, other demographic measures are not very encouraging. The current CBS (crude birth rate) of 40-42 per 1000, and the TFR (total fertility rate) of 6.1, both indicate very high fertility. There has been a slight improvement in the CDR (crude death rate) 18-20 and IMR (infant mortality rate) 130-140 per 1000 compared to some of the neighboring South Asian countries. The life expectancy at birth has also gone up--from 46 years in 1971, to 55 years in 1985. However, decline in mortality without a decline in fertility will create a worse population boom.

#### PIPALBOTE CLUSTER: A CASE STUDY OF POVERTY

The Pipalbote cluster of the Barbote Panchayat presents an unusually interesting case of economic development and positive adaptation to population growth. Pipalbote is not a typical village, and is located in eastern Nepal. Twelve months of field research from October 1980 until September 1981 were spent in the Barbote Panchayat of the Ilam District. Within the Barbote area, seven village settlements were selected termed the "Pipalbote" settlement cluster, for a basic microlevel village study (total: 100 households and 775 people).

The total area of Barbote Panchayat is about eight square miles. Most of the settlements are located 1-4 miles away from Ilam Bazaar, the headquarters of Ilam District. The settlements are dispersed at various altitudes, ranging from 3000 to 5800 feet above sea level. Barbote Panchayat is linked by a motorable road to Ilam bazaar. There are 14 ethnic groups living in this panchayat. Demographic statistics are available for Barbote Panchayat for 18 years (1964-1981).

Despite various pressures, the people of Pipalbote cluster have developed a number of strategies to adapt to the changing situation. These changes are: diversification of agriculture, adoption of cash crops, better use of marginal land, the development of nonagricultural sources of income (trade, army service, white collar jobs, wage labor), breakdown in the traditional caste norms, out-migration, and lower fertility.

The cash value of the total annual income of all the people from various sources was NRs.865,986--of which NRs.598,050 was from the agricultural sector and the remaining NRs.267936 from the nonagricultural sector. Agriculture thus constitutes only 69 per cent of the total income. If this income were evenly distributed in the Pipalbote cluster, each household, on average, would receive a sum of NRs.8585 or a per capita income of NRs.1117 (US\$94.00), excluding produce for which equivalent rupees cannot be calculated. This per capita income is lower than in Nepal as a whole in 1981. In addition, an average household has fixed capital assets (land, livestock, and household goods excluding gold and silver) of NRs.53,063.

The per capita cereal consumption is above 500 grams and an average person in Pipalbote consumes between 2000-3000 calories, and 50-80 grams of protein per day.

In 1981, the literacy rate of the people of the Pipalbote cluster was 38.5 percent. Ninety-three percent of the households (one household had no children) had sent some of their children to schools.

The 1979/80 and 1980/81 records of the crude death rate and the infant mortality rate show health conditions to be better in the Pipalbote cluster than in Nepal as a whole. The CBR was 14-16 per 1000, while the IMR was only 133.3.

In sum, Pipalbote, with its easy access to Ilam Bazaar is, at least for the present, moving towards prosperity rather than poverty (Dahal, 1983).

#### CONCLUSION

On the whole, the data on poverty in Nepal are sketchy and fragmentary. It is, therefore, necessary to gather both the micro and macrolevel data while analyzing the problem of rural poverty in Nepal. Data on landowners, tenure, income, food production and consumption, employment, literacy, health, and other demographic measures are helpful in understanding the dimensions of the poverty problem. These data assess the socioeconomic conditions of people and can be considered determinants of rural poverty in Nepal.

On the other hand, the available macrolevel data on poverty have questionable reliability, and the scholars who have relied heavily on such data seem to have misconstrued the dimensions of poverty in Nepal. Similarly, the microlevel data are still too sketchy to assess the overall poverty situation.

However, considering some of the micro and macro aspects of the relationship between land ownership and poverty, food consumption and poverty, and access to public services and poverty, Nepal's current socioeconomic condition is staggering and seemingly hopeless. With the exception of the food consumption data, all other data confirm that most rural Nepalese are poor.

Rural poverty in Nepal is associated with a number of economic factors: population growth, minimal landholding per capita, poor productivity of land, lack of marketing facilities, lack of alternative employment opportunities, poor educational attainment, and the overall socioeconomic structure which favors the rich over the poor.

The other dimensions of persisting poverty are due to existing sociocultural values. In Nepal, although many intellectuals believe that the present socioeconomic structure is built on oppression and exploitation of people, they want to preserve the present structure because it gives them prestige and wealth. The people of this culture are affluent and wealthy, and their position will be threatened if poor people are allowed to participate equally with them.

The Nepali caste system is, in fact, defined in terms of endogamy, where certain peoples are allowed to conduct only certain types of work. The Brahmanical values are deeply embedded in the total way of life of the people. This has invariably led towards the process of sanskritization and Hinduization, giving more orthodox, stratified caste hierarchical values, even for those who were originally outside the caste hierarchy. These deeply held sociocultural values inhibit cohesion within and between groups and encourage poverty.

A third dimension of the persisting poverty in Nepal is the lack of sincerity in government programs. Many of the government's village development programs, including land reform, do not improve the socioeconomic condition of the poor because it is not committed to the programs.

#### Policy Recommendations

1. It is necessary to properly understand the nature of rural poverty so that a realistic program to help the poor can be devised. The vital information needed in understanding the rural poverty situation in Nepal has been discussed in this paper. In addition, the views of the poor families must be obtained. This will provide an in-depth understanding of the economic conditions and the sociocultural values of the rural people.
2. A serious anthropological study should be undertaken to find out the inadequacies of development projects aimed at reducing rural poverty. Though these projects were aimed at helping the overall conditions of the rural poor, they did not reach the poor. Why?
3. The assumption that the poverty must be studied exclusively with reference to the condition of the poor themselves is false. In the context of Nepal, a research proposal to study the "rich" is desirable because it gives an understanding as to why other Nepalese are poor. It is necessary to look at the sociology of the rich to grasp their culture and way of life, and also how they become rich. This is immensely difficult because it is the rich who supply funds to study the poor.
4. Poverty is a microphenomenon as well. To this extent, its solution is possible only through microlevel planning. Microlevel planning will be effective only if the program of government decentralization is effectively carried out.

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