

Kitini Gaon Panchayat: a presentation¹

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Kitini Gaon Panchayat is located on the south-eastern fringe of the Kathmandu Valley about eight miles from the headquarters of Lalitpur District Panchayat in Patan. Kitini is connected with Kathmandu by a motorable road. The total land area in Kitini panchayat amounts to 6937 ropanis, 2 annas and 1 paisa according to the cadastral survey. Out of this 4418 ropanis, 10 annas and 1 paisa is cultivated land. This can be further sub-divided into khet and pakho, the former being 1796 ropanis, 11 annas and 2 paisa, the latter 2641 ropanis, 14 annas and 3 paisa.

Agriculture is of course the main occupation but some people gain their livelihood from other sources as well. Within the panchayat there are two lime-stone quarries owned by two local businessmen. There is also a marble factory where the same businessmen have minor interests, the bulk of the shares being owned by people living elsewhere. Some people furnish eggs vegetables and other products to the handful of shop owners in Kitini panchayat on a contract basis and to St. Xavier's Boarding School. The Boarding School also employs people from the panchayat as cooks, gardeners and so on. There are also some undertakings of HMG in Kitini panchayat such as a forest office, a botanical garden, a horticultural garden and a fish farm. Many people work outside the panchayat, most of them in the service of HMG and the bulk of these have their place of work in Kathmandu. There are also some who are privately employed.

The population of Kitini panchayat numbers about 420 families. As one family I count the unit that owns land in common i.e. where land is not divided between siblings, even if they happen to live in different houses. Out of these 420 odd families roughly 220 have one or more members who are literate, ranging from these with no formal schooling (common in the generation above 30 years) and up to a few people who have passed M.A. Literacy is mainly confined to men in the over 30 generation; but in the younger age-groups girls attend school especially in the lower grades. However there is still a great cultural barrier against girls receiving education. In many quarters it is looked upon as highly improper.

I have divided the families of Kitini panchayat into two broad economic categories: those which are purely agricultural (working the land as owners or tenants and/or working the land of others on a daily basis at peak seasons of the agricultural year. I have also included "self employed" people in this category: basket-weaving, carpentry for instance, as well as traditional

service relations between families of different castes), and those who do wage work or salary work outside the purely agricultural sector.

This division rests upon the assumption that the agricultural sector is more "traditional" and that the work done outside it is an indication of a transformation of rural life due to changes on all-Nepal level. It should immediately be stated, however, that Kitini panchayat being so close to Kathmandu there has probably never been a "pure" rural economy. People have joined the army; Brahmans have probably for a long time worked in the bureaucracy; and there have been shop owners who have been dependent on commercial relations with business men in town for stocking their shops. Still, the concept of a rural economy is useful when assessing the speed with which people are drawn into another type of economy, based in this case on industrialization and the swelling of Government and private institutions in the capital; in quantitative terms these changes are of fairly recent origin as far as the people in Kitini panchayat are concerned. If one did an analysis on the basis of economic class, one would have to shift the category of people working the land of others on a daily basis to those who work for wages and salaries in other spheres of the general economy. Likewise, under the category "self employed" one would have to include modern trades as well as those pertaining to the rural economy. Thus, economic class cuts across the dichotomy of a relatively self-contained rural economy, and a more integrated national economy.

Furthermore I would like to use the term "status group" to denote a hierarchy of groups, with regard to the social esteem in which they are held. The reasons for this esteem may be due to a variety of factors like wealth, education, political and administrative power and so on. One can be born into a status group or one can become a member of it by virtue of one's own achievement. A status group of the former kind is obviously a caste, which is ideally rural and based on different relations to land. Again, I want to stress "ideally", since empirically there has always been more than the rural component to it. In a more differentiated economy status groups are often based on achievement and in the case of Nepal high status group does often mean high caste as well. This is true of Kitini panchayat as well, as shall be seen in the following.

First of all one has to decide what should be meant by "caste". This is a question which has plagued anthropologists working in India and it is an issue which continues to be debated. Fortunately, with regard to Nepal, the demarcation of castes is in some respects easier. Here one does not find hierarchically ranked groups within, say, the Brahmans or the Chhettris. Instead they are divided into exogamous clans with the same ritual standing. Therefore, one can speak of Brahmans, Chhettris, Khattris and so

on without having to specify which particular group within the category one is referring to. However there are a few things which mar this general picture. In Kitini panchayat one difficulty is to determine the place of the Tamangs; a second is the existence of a separate caste system of the Newars and a third is the ambiguous place of the recently formed caste of the Magars.

The Tamangs are Buddhist and thus not a Hindu caste. Still, they are referred to as a "jati". Thus, it is impossible to postulate a single cultural system for Kitini panchayat. This latter is an administrative creation; and members of the constituent units, "jatis", come together for specific purposes: administrative, political, economic and so forth. These are the very reasons for the creation of the panchayat and it is only in these respects that it can be called a unit or, without overtones of perfection, a system. When I use the term "jati" or "caste" it refers to this functional level and not to the cultural level. The Newars are divided into castes within themselves, but other people speak of them simply as Newars. They are thus considered a community from the outside while from the inside they are hierarchically arranged. I shall use both approaches. The Magars are a caste which has recently come into existence in Kitini panchayat. They are former serfs of the landowning groups and were known as Ghartis, except for two families who have always been Magars. About 28 years ago the Ghartis were brought together by a Gharti army officer from Kitini who made them start calling themselves Magars and made them adopt Magar clan names. Most of the families who chose Thapa as their clan name also formed a guthi which was to help family members meet funeral costs when a member died. The majority of the members come from Kitini panchayat, but there are members from outside as well. Although the Ghartis in a sense became Magars, other people still look upon them as Ghartis and refer to them by that name. I shall, however, refer to them as Magars.

There are two big jatis in Kitini panchayat: the Tamangs, numbering just over 100 families and the Khattris with roughly the same number of families. The Khattris are made up almost exclusively of one clan, however, the Silwals numbering 97 families. Then come the Brahmans with just over 50 families, Sarkis with 33, Magars 34, Newars 17 (Shrestha 9, Jyapu 7 and Khusa 1), Chhettris 20, Mahantas 17, Kamars 16, Kami 9, Nagarkoti 6, Damais 6, Pahari 3 and Ghale 3.

Among the Khattris 27 families are economically rurals i.e. exist wholly on their own fields, self-employment and/or work on the fields of others. 29 Tamang families are wholly dependent on agriculture, while the figure for the Brahmans is 14, for the Magars 12, for the Chhettris 6, for the Newars 10 (Shrestha 3, Jyapu 6 and Khusa 1), for the Mahantas 4, for the Kamars 12, for the Paharis 0, for the Ghale 2, for the Nagarkotis 4. For the castes,

formerly known as Untouchables the figures are: for the Sarkis 28, for the Kamis 5 and for the Damais 5 (out of which one is doing only traditional caste work). There are a total of 4 Damai families doing caste work, there are 5 Kamis and only 4 Sarkis in this category. The Brahmans who work in their traditional role as priests number 11 only 2 of them having no other source of income except what they get from their land.

As can be seen from these figures roughly 37% of the families in Kitini panchayat still derive their income from within the local agricultural sphere. It can also be seen that the Khattris, Brahmans, Chhettris, Mahantas and Tamangs are the ones who have the lowest number in relation to number of families to the jati, that have moved out of the rural economy and are becoming enmeshed in a new type of economy, without therefore losing touch with agriculture. There is a common pattern where one or two members of the family work in industry or some institution while the other members stay behind on the farm. There is no moving away from the land in favour of new opportunities, mainly because these new opportunities are not sufficient to substitute satisfactorily for what one can get from the land. They are an addition, nothing more in most cases.

As these non-agricultural occupations some distinctions can be made. First, there are these which are local, where the place of work is within Kitini panchayat or close to it and those which are far away, mainly in Kathmandu. Second, there are those posts for which the candidate has to have a certain education and those where he does not have to be literate. These facts have a bearing on the recruitment pattern. In the first case the person can go himself and ask for a job for which he thinks he is qualified. In the second case, especially when the respective place of work is located in Kathmandu he often needs someone to introduce him. It is very difficult to get a job in town without having someone to help. In a few cases people get their job through schooling, they have been educated specially for the kind of job they are doing, or are accepted by the army after applying. Most Tamang families have at least one member who works either in the marble factory or in the lime-stone quarries. The Tamangs make up the overwhelming work force in these industries. The higher posts are staffed by people from the higher castes, though, like Khattris and Brahmans. Likewise, a few Tamangs work in the other local institutions such as the Boarding, the Botanical Garden and so on. These low positions on the part of the Tamangs are matched by a very low rate of literacy among them, with members from only a handful of families being able to read and write and none has any formal education beyond 5th class.

As for the people who work away from the panchayat or the area immediately surrounding it, they are almost completely made up of members of the higher jatis, and in well over half the cases

they were helped by other people to get the job. These helpers fall into the categories of kin, friends and villagers. Then there are quite a number of people who maintain that they get their job through their own effort, but others maintain that they must have been helped. The category of people working outside the panchayat who were employed as a result of helping themselves are rather few and as mentioned above have mostly received training for it, and it also seems that some have been accepted by the army without introduction. It should be noted that there is not a rigid pattern with low castes working in low positions around Kitini panchayat and high castes working outside it, but there is a very clear tendency towards this. There are however very few higher-caste members who have high positions in Kathmandu or in any other place away from Kitini panchayat. Many of them hold posts in bureaucracy, however, it is obvious that they have to be literate. And when looking at the rate of literacy among the higher castes it is beyond doubt that they are highly favoured in this respect. Several have passed SLC and have a university education while children of most of the high caste families receive formal education.

This drawing away of people from agriculture has increased considerably during recent years. Earlier there were a few higher-caste people who helped others to jobs, mainly in the army or as peons or watch men. With the increase in schooling possibilities as well as the increase in job opportunities following Nepal's emergence from isolation with the ambition to become a modern state, this trend has increased markedly. And, of course, especially the posts which demand formal education have been occupied by people from Kitini panchayat only rather recently.

In the panchayat there are only two full-time business men, both Silwals, but there are a handful of others who do business on and off, tender for a contract and when the contract is finished, return to Kitini and live on the money until they get a contract again. The two Silwal businessmen, however, have made investments, as was seen in the beginning, both in the lime-stone quarries and in the marble factory. In addition they own lorries, which are used to carry their own goods and are also hired out on a contract basis.

There is thus a change to a more diversified economy and at the same time the status-groups, jatis, that define a person adequately in the local context are not being supplanted by, but exist side by side with status groups of a newer kind which are defined by bureaucratic standing, education, wealth and so on. This change makes it possible, for instance, for one of the Silwal businessmen to have married a Tamang without his children losing status. He commands such a dominating position locally that the matter is never brought forward. In this sense caste, which has never been rigidly defined in Nepal will be even more ambiguous and will tend more and more, but maybe never completely, to depend on other

factors making up a person's status. So far, however, caste is stronger than class and this for two reasons. One is that caste and class have a tendency to go together and the other is that land, which is the basic for caste is still the ultimate security for most people. This can be seen in the loyalties that the people working outside the agricultural sphere have. These who work in Kathmandu, for instance, maintain that Kitini is their home and that it is there they want to live; and they see their time in Kathmandu as a necessary evil. They stay in town to earn money, to get an education or both. They do not easily form friendships in town that overshadow their commitment to Kitini; and they go to Kitini when they have leisure. In a way this may be surprising. One would have thought, at least for people with education, that they would feel more at home with other people who have had schooling and who do the same kind of work, rather than longing to be back in the village. Apart from the purely psychological pull the fact of having grown up there may exert on a person, I think that the explanation has to do with the fact that society is still based ultimately on the necessity of possessing land, and the kind of social relations that this gives rise to. First of all land is an economic asset. In Kitini panchayat, like all over Nepal, people would not be able to survive physically without their land. Wages and salaries obtainable outside are too small to be depended on; and land and the circle of kin are the only means of subsistence a person has when ill or old. The land being the ultimate point of reference for an individual means that it also has strong symbolic qualities. One interacts with one's kin, one is dependent on them and they are the people with whom one shares life crises. When the settlement pattern, as in Kitini, is made up of hamlets, often at a considerable distance from each other, each inhabited mainly by one caste this tendency to exclusion in favour of kin-and caste-fellows is increased. This fragmented social set-up can also be seen at festivals and on other ritual occasions. The effective units who gather together are the families, rarely does the whole caste or even the clan come together. Thus, there is also a religious stress on the small kin unit. An additional factor explaining the strong attachment to Kitini felt by people who work elsewhere might perhaps be that most of them, although they live away during the week, are not so far away that they cannot maintain effective communication with their families; as a result ties are not broken for any long periods of time.

To put this in terms of class (economic class, that is) one could say that the class positions that people acquire as a result of their work outside farming are secondary to their positions as farmers, a class to which almost all belong (even if there are differences within this class, like those who own their land and those who are tenants. Tenants, however, have a secure position as a result of the land reform). There are only 15 families in the whole panchayat who do not farm. One might imagine that the situation would be different for them, but one has to remember the cultural

environment which forces them to take part in the inclusion-of-kin, exclusion-of-others exercise in which everybody else is engaged. And, as a result of this, they live with their kin, who farm. They probably own a house and live in a hamlet with their caste-fellows. And lastly, they would be even worse off if they left and tried to get work some-where else. So, even in the case of the few landless people, they too are still tied to the land by extension as it were, both by hard material necessities and by softer ideological considerations.

As for the wage-work on the lands of the other people, there is once again a correlation with caste status. Many high-caste families get enough produce from their lands to feed the family members, while a great number of lower-caste families have to resort to agricultural labour to make up for food shortage (among the Tamangs, for instance, only 3 families are able to rely entirely on the produce of their lands, while the figure for the Khattris is 63).

So far, I have been mainly concerned with economic conditions and how these determine the behaviour of people. The change that is taking place in the economic sphere is related to developments on an all-Nepal level, and is the result both of purposeful planning and unintended results of Nepal's emergence into the world arena. For the people of Kitini panchayat, some new opportunities are there for the taking. To a certain degree they can choose whether to make use of them or not (although one could argue that their low income from the land would make them eager to grasp the opportunities). In this sense Government involvement in the lives of people is indirect. When one turns to the political side, however, it becomes direct. All panchayats must have the same administration, a panchayat elected by universal adult suffrage, and this panchayat has to act according to specific rules. In Kitini panchayat an active role in politics is mainly confined to the higher castes. This is obvious, since they have the education, the connections and the necessary experience to realize what it is all about. Their political horizons go beyond the panchayat and they are in a position to know the rules of the game. It is notable that, despite their high proportion in the total population of the panchayat, there is only one Tamang member on the panchayat and he comes from a ward where the voters are exclusively Tamang. Politics in Kitini panchayat is mainly the business of the Silwals. They are high caste, own most of the land and they are numerous. There are at least two factions among them and then economics enters again, since the two Silwal business men although they do not engage actively in politics have often the power to make or break a candidate, although this is not always true. The reasons for voting for a candidate are different depending on whether the voter is literate and has some knowledge of political issues or not. In the case of an illiterate voter, it is often a matter of being the last to persuade him, since to an illiterate person the candidate and the promises he gives are more important than references to

cloudy political ideas. People are often treated to tea, cigarettes, food or wine in order to make them vote for a certain candidate. Ties of an economic kind, like bista relationship, tenancy and so on are exploited. Kinship plays a considerable role, both among the illiterate and the more educated.

Among the higher castes, where the candidate and the prospective voter are often on the same level both in terms of status and education, the reasons for changing allegiances may often be petty squabbles or an alleged insult and as a result the membership composition of political groups and factions can change quite frequently. I would also refer this to the role that land plays. Since the people in the high castes share to a great extent the same status position, issues have to be personal rather than based on different class interests. Arguments about land boundaries and diversion of irrigation water play a big role in this context. In the same way, the leaders of the factions may remain rather constant but the membership varies. Even on this level, personality and relations between individuals far outweigh ideological considerations when allegiance to one or the other candidate is being decided on.

There are also class organizations in the village. They are composed of active politicians and high-caste people and they lead a rather dormant life. The ones that exist are: Farmer's Organization, Ex-Servicemen's Organization, Youth Organization. The general impression is that the members do not know what to do with the organizations. There has also been a co-operative shop, but it has gone out of business. Some say this was because of lack of skill in the management, others maintain it was because of weak support from the parent organization.

The land reform had some success in Kitini panchayat. Landlordism was never a problem and in this respect no spectacular achievements were possible. In the area of compulsory savings it was a failure. These were not collected after the first year due to the fact that they were not adequately stored and maintained. It was in the fields of loans and security of tenants that the land reform was most successful. Many loans were simply not repaid and a number of money lenders incurred losses, in some cases substantial. Most tenants were registered although a few are still without rights due to "special arrangements". In this case the individualistic bent in politics worked in favour of the tenants, since the opponents of one landowner would tell his tenants that they could get security of tenure, and he in turn would tell the tenants of his opponents the same thing. The land-owners never united against the tenants in an attempt to prevent them getting security of tenure. Instead they tried to harass their adversaries by means of encouraging their tenants

Up to now, I have been talking about men. But since the fate of women in Nepal has been discussed in relation to development I shall indicate their position in Kitini panchayat. Women do the day-to-day work on the fields in addition to their household chores. They also work the fields of other people on an exchange basis which is often restricted to families of the same caste or neighbours-which very often amounts to the same thing. The world of the women is very much tied to what I called the rural economy and their status is virtually completely explicable in terms of their caste status. A man may have a status in virtue of being an officer or a clerk, but his wife, living on the land in Kitini, is still known by her caste status. As was mentioned earlier the education of women is grossly underdeveloped and there are only a couple of women, both widows, who have taken up work in Kathmandu. Both work as cooks and got the jobs through connections from Kitini. Women work for wages, though. Either on the land of other people at peak seasons or, and this is mainly true of the Tamang women, in the marble-factory or in the lime-stone quarries. The work pattern of Tamang women is different from that of the men. The men tend to work more regularly, while the women work there when they can get away from agricultural work. There is no Women's Organization in Kitini panchayat and women are simply non-existent in politics. Most of the time they stay in the house - their most popular diversions being a chat at the water tap or by the stream when washing clothes. Many women get money from their paternal homes if their kin can afford it; and they have a small economic sphere of their own, where they lend each other small amounts of money for extra articles of consumption which are not within the official household budget. On the whole, the daily routine for the women in Kitini panchayat seems to be more or less the same, no matter what caste they belong to. There are of course relative differences in the living standards of the individual families, but these are quantitative rather than qualitative.

The argument of this essay is simple. It puts forward the idea that Kitini panchayat in social terms can be understood from the role that land plays both in a material and in a social way. But since Kitini is not isolated from the world around, developments on the national, and perhaps even international level have to be taken into account. Still, the ultimate point of reference must be the locality and will remain so until the transformation of Nepal has gone so far that land is no longer the sine qua non for existence.

Footnotes

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