

## Book Review

*Half Way to the Mountains: The Jirels of Eastern Nepal.* By H. Sidky in collaboration with J. Subedi, James Hamill and S.W. Blangero, Kathmandu: Center for Nepal and Asian Studies, 2002, pp. IX-209, Maps, colored photos, Appendices, Bibliography, Indices, Rs. 1,500.

Ethnographic studies in Nepal is a relatively recent phenomenon, that dates back to the decade of 1960s; and entered into a take-off stage by the turn of this century. From the point of human diversity Nepal is an ethnic paradise, where there are at least seventy-five distinct ethnic groups, who live, work and lay together in a small area of 56,000 square miles. The book is a micro-study of the *Jirels* of Dolakha district of Eastern Nepal a little known people to the outside world. In fact, this study is the outcome of a multi-disciplinary team consisting of a sociologist, anthropologists, and a genetic researcher.

Syncretism is the guiding spirit of Nepali civilization. This is seen not only in the free give-and-take of ideas and symbols between the different schools of Hinduism (Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism) but also in the way Hindu religious symbols and thought system out across the schools of Buddhism and Lamaism. The title of the book *Half Way to the Mountains...* conveys in a best possible way the spirit and content of the *Jirel* culture which is an unique blend of accommodation and assimilation of the orthodox and heterodox elements in the Hindu, Buddhist and Shamanistic cultures. It is because of this remarkable feature of the *Jirel* culture that the authors of the book have felt very comfortable with the above title. To quote

*The title is intended to emphasize the extraordinary syncretic nature of the Jirel socio-cultural and religious traditions, being symbolically and figuratively located half-way between the low lands, from whence emanates Hindu cultural influences and the lofty mountains, the abode of ancient Gods from where Buddhism spreads to this part of Nepal.* (p. xi.)

Genetically speaking the *Jirel* community appears to be a hybrid between the Sherpa and the Sunar clan. Quantitative genetic studies also tends to conform the above ancestry of the *Jirels* (Blangero, 1978).

The social and economic organization of the *Jirels* places them within the periphery of the folk culture. The *Jirels* operate a subsistence economy based upon the cultivation of cereals, vegetables, some fruits and the maintenance of livestock and poultry. Like in all folk cultures division of labor is linked intricately with various ways in which the people cooperate with each other in all spheres of economic activities specially in the field of production. Here one sees patterns of co-operation, which enhances the overall production process. The construction of a road to Jiri has opened up the *Jirels* to tourism industry and slowly the barter economy was replaced by cash economy. But the *Jirels* were not able to take advantage of this new development, for politically they were not sophisticated and

economically they were not enterprising. Thus, they lagged behind the communities in the *Jirel* valley like the Sherpas and the *Brahmans* and *Chetris*. There was time when the *Jirels* owned land collectively under the *Kipat* tradition granted by the central government, but today this practice has been obsolete. As result *Jirel-Kipat* land fell to the *Chetri* community of the *Jirel* valley.

Since 1950 the social organization of the *Jirels* has been greatly weakened by the breaking up of the clan exogamy and the breaking of the group endogamy. Today young *Jirel* men and women seek educated spouses from other ethnic groups. This upward social mobility has weakened the *Jirel* social structure. To add to this the *Jirels* have lost their political status with the advent of the multi-party democracy since 1990. Local politics today is dominated by non-*Jirels* specially by the *Brahmans* and *Chetris*. The political situation of the *Jirels* have changed for the worse as the national political system exerts its greater control over the valley. The tradition-based *Jirels* are now finding themselves bewildered as they have to choose between two conflicting ideologies Marxian socialism and democratic socialism diluted with market economy. In the new political process, the *Jirels* have lost much of their political autonomy.

The rise of materialistic development has led to a surge of individualism as opposed to the collective social and religious activities of the *Jirels*. This has led to the extinction of the clan God worship. All this is an indicator of profound changes in socio-cultural, economic and political tradition within the *Jirel* society. We must, thus, read this book with a painful awareness that under the wave of what we today call "modernization or westernization" another important living cultural tradition is beginning to die.

A very important strength of this book is the visual anthropology as it is documented by over 400 coloured brilliant photographs. Again the methodology of in-depth interviews and participant observations has been used with great care and precision to make this research highly valuable and significant. The only hitch in the book is poor book binding and the flimsy jacket designs which leaves much to be desired and has detracted the over all quality of the book. The price is prohibitive for an average Nepali reader.

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