

Anthropological Writings of James F. Fisher on Nepal

Introduced and Compiled by Gaurab KC

James F. Fisher, born in Kansas, the U.S.A., is a well known name among anthropological audiences in Nepal. He belongs to the first generation of anthropologists of Nepal. He arrived in Nepal initially, in 1962, as a member of the first group of Peace Corps Volunteers, the program initiated by President Kennedy. He remained here till 1965 and therefore also holds first-hand memories of the King Mahendra-ruled Nepali state or the early years of Panchayat system. Some of his reflections on that period have been published both in English and Nepali in magazines and edited volumes.

As a Peace Corps Volunteer he served for two years as an English teacher in Bhaktapur at Sri Padma High School and at Bhaktapur College, and later also at Tribhuvan Adarsha Vidyalaya, now known as Pharping Boarding School. He also worked in Sir Edmund Hillary's projects in Solu-Khumbu area in 1964, utilizing his prior involvement in education to provide a helping hand in building Sherpa schools. This experience resulted in his MA thesis, *Schools for Sherpas*, submitted to the University of Chicago in 1967. With support from the Fulbright program, he again came to Nepal in 1968 and stayed till 1970, studying the Kaike speaking Magars of Dolpa, in northwest Nepal. In 1986 he published *Trans-Himalayan Traders: Economy, Society, and Culture in Northwest Nepal*, based on his Ph.D. dissertation. The book dealt with a series of transaction cycles conducted in Dolpa, based in part on Barth's 'transactional model' of society.

Since then Fisher has visited Nepal from time to time, conducting research funded by the Ford Foundation, National Science Foundation, Wenner-Gren Foundation, Social Science Research Council, East-West Center, Smithsonian Institution, and numerous grants from Carleton College. While the disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology were being institutionalized in Tribhuvan University, he spent 1984–1986 under a Fulbright assignment assisting in the founding of the Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology there. He taught the MA students and initiated the journal *Occasional Papers in Sociology and Anthropology*. His book, *Trans-Himalayan Traders*, and some of his other writings are mandatory readings for the MA students of anthropology/sociology at the Tribhuvan University.

Fisher's anthropological writings, known for their breadth and depth, also reflect his very deep affection for Nepal. His anthropological observations are sharp and detailed, touching upon various themes and issues. It is noteworthy that while most anthropologists have chosen to pursue the study of Janajati groups at the expense of Brahmins and Chhetris, Fisher has given equal space to the latter in his work. Illustrating this interest par excellence is his biographical study of the life, work, and times of Tanka Prasad Acharya and his wife, Rewanta Kumari Acharya, which constitutes a novel, person-centered ethnography. His overall writing has reflected and contributed, at a high level, to economic anthropology, ecology, "futures" ethnography,

disciplinary history of Himalayan Anthropology and Nepal, life history method, individual narratives, globalization, modernization, and auto ethnography.

Fisher spent most of his academic life teaching at Carleton College. He is now retired, but his academic passion, zeal and enthusiasm for his chosen life work continue unabated. As he says, retirement means doing what you've always enjoyed doing, but no longer receiving a paycheck for it. For example, he recently participated in the making of two films on Dor Bahadur Bista (one of them made jointly by Sachin Ghimire and myself, the other by Kesang Tseten) and he is currently writing a screenplay version of his book, *Living Martyrs*. An accomplished raconteur and a good source of jokes, wit, humor, and anecdotes, he is now also pursuing his long-standing interest in Nepali humor (he taught a course on the Anthropology of Humor at Carleton).

Most of Fisher's writings are related to Nepal, and almost all of them I have read. In 2011, I met and interviewed him several times while making a documentary film (see above). Fisher's interview was invaluable for our film in acquiring more information about Dor Bahadur Bista, whom Fisher had known practically since his arrival in Nepal. In addition, his interview with Dor Bahadur Bista, published in *Current Anthropology* in 1996, is one of the primary sources allowing the public to know more about this pioneering scholar.

On November 3, 2013 I conducted a long, detailed, and comprehensive interview with Fisher. This conversation has been published in *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 18(2): 329–388 in 2013. The bibliography below is based on his CV, what was available in Carleton's website, my archival search at the Martin Chautari library, and numerous emails Fisher and I exchanged with each other.

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