

## Lionel Caplan

*What are the personal and academic reasons behind your becoming a Nepal researcher? Please answer by providing a time reference for your initiation into Nepal Studies and the completion of your graduate training.*

There are probably several reasons behind my decision to become a Nepal researcher. (1) I had completed my first degree (B. Comm.) at McGill University in Montreal, Canada (1952) and after some time working in the commercial sector I developed an interest in non-western societies and decided to return to my studies. At that time Canadian universities had few if any courses on such societies, so in 1961 I came to do postgraduate work in anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London. (2) After completing an MA in Anthropology in 1963 (My MA thesis was a study of Land Tenure in East Africa, but it was a library thesis, based on existing literature and not on field research) I decided to go on to a PhD and at first I thought I might do my fieldwork in Africa. But because the staff of the Anthropology Department at SOAS was predominantly focused on South Asia, and because at the time funding was available for research in Asia but not for Africa, I decided to opt for South Asia.

One of my teachers also pointed out that as an anthropologist the venue of my fieldwork was less important than the theoretical issues I explored. I initially thought about working in Sikkim on Drukpa-Nepalese relations, but at the time Sikkim was considered a sensitive area and the Indian government did not give permission. Professor Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, who was the head of the anthropology department and had spent a number of years researching in Nepal, suggested I work there. There had been very little research conducted in east Nepal, and he thought it might be interesting to explore, among other things, the *kipat* system of land tenure among the Limbus. I spent several months reading whatever I could find about Nepal and learning Nepali. Dor Bahadur Bista was at SOAS at the time, assisting TW Clark write his book *Introduction to*

## 2 • *Nepal Studies in the UK*

*Nepali* (1963), so he was my first teacher. In January 1964 I arrived in Kathmandu on the first leg of a journey to Ilam, and then spent some fifteen months in a cluster of settlements in the district inhabited by Limbus and other mainly high caste people. I returned to London in May 1965 and completed my PhD in December 1966.

*What was the thematic focus of your research for your PhD? Also explain if any British national or disciplinary traditions were important in your selection of Nepal as a research site.*

My PhD was a study of land tenure in a 'tribal' community and how this affected other aspects of society and the social relationships with surrounding communities. At the time there was a great deal of interest among anthropologists in the land tenures of non-western, non-capitalist societies – especially those in Africa – so in many ways I was extending this interest to South Asia. My research in Ilam examined the relations between the Limbus, a people long-settled in east Nepal, and the high-caste 'Hindus' who later entered the region. It analysed the *kipat* system of land tenure among the Limbus and described the confrontation between the two groups over access to this land. It considered the impact on this struggle of, firstly, the Nepal government's land policy, and secondly, the opportunities available in the twentieth century to Limbus for service in the Gurkha Brigades. Theoretically, it explored the links between culture and politics. It was later published as *Land and Social Change in East Nepal: A Study of Hindu-Tribal Relations* (1970).

My selection of Nepal as a research site was, as explained above, somewhat fortuitous, so there were no 'national or disciplinary traditions' driving this choice. However, because there were long-standing political and military links between Britain and Nepal, there was already a certain amount of scholarly interest in and library resources on Nepal when I came to do research, which obviously facilitated my own work.

*What is your research focus now? What other thematic transformations have occurred in your research in the mean time? How do you explain the changes that have occurred in your research focus (i.e., can the source of change be located in theoretical shifts in your discipline and/or political and social developments in Nepal)?*

My research focus has altered over the years partly because of (1) developments in the discipline, (2) evolution of my own interests and (3) changes in the venue of research. After fieldwork in Ilam I decided to study a district capital (bazaar) in western Nepal– there had been very little work on 'non-tribal' populations, and virtually none at all on these

bazaars. I spent a year (1969) in 'Belaspur' (Dailekh) studying the links between the town and its rural hinterland. That study was later published as *Administration and Politics in a Nepalese Town: The Study of a District Capital and its Environs* (1975).

Following the completion of this project, for personal/family reasons I decided to shift my research venue to India, to concentrate on a large urban centre (Madras), and to study the emergence of the Christian community there. In the course of this research (1974-5, 1981-2), it became apparent that the previous 25 years had seen a growth of fundamentalist beliefs and activities, and that this trend was part of a world-wide phenomenon which was beginning to engage the attention of social scientists. I organised a seminar and subsequently edited a book on comparative forms of fundamentalism (Caplan 1987a), as well as publishing a monograph on the research (Caplan 1987b).

Around the time I completed this research there was an explosion of interest in forms of anthropological writing, arising from Edward Said's classic study *Orientalism* (1978). I decided to examine the ways in which British authors – mostly serving and former officers – had written about 'Gurkhas'. This project involved mainly library research, but also included a number of interviews with British Gurkha officers and a brief return visit to my original fieldwork site in Ilam (1988). It was published as *Warrior Gentlemen: 'Gurkhas' in the Western Imagination* (1995).

With the completion of this project I decided to do a study of Anglo-Indians (or Eurasians), who were the 'mixed-race' descendants of colonial European males and local women. I first encountered Anglo-Indians while I was engaged in research on the Christian community in Madras, and I did several brief periods of fieldwork in that city (1991-2, 1996, 1999). This interest coincided with a wider academic concern with colonial and postcolonial issues, including hybridity and mixed-race populations. This project was completed soon after I retired in 1997, and a book published in 2001 (Caplan 2001).

*Since you completed your last research project and retired from SOAS have you felt like doing any more work related to Nepal?*

Of course since retiring I have very much wanted to do more fieldwork in Nepal. But (1) age has made travel to Nepal and especially to areas outside Kathmandu a bit too demanding, and (2) once you are out of the University scene it becomes increasingly difficult to find the funds to support research and fieldwork. So I have to be content with maintaining an interest in Nepal by reading whatever I can and attending lectures or seminars whenever possible.

#### 4 • *Nepal Studies in the UK*

*Before retirement did you operate from a traditionally defined department (such as anthropology, sociology, etc.) or from an area studies centre (such as South Asia Centre)?*

Throughout my career as an anthropologist I was employed by the Department of Anthropology at SOAS, and I was also attached to the Centre of South Asian Studies at SOAS.

*Did you teach and if so, at what levels? What kinds of courses did you teach and what Nepal-related content were included in those courses?*

I taught at both undergraduate (BA) and postgraduate levels (MA, MPhil, PhD). The courses were general (e.g. Introduction, Theory), thematic/specialist (e.g. Immigrant communities in Britain), and regional (Ethnography of South Asia). The latter courses were mainly India-focused, but did contain some Nepal-related content. I also participated in teaching some Nepal-specific courses organised by Dr Michael Hutt in the Department of South Asia at SOAS.

*Where have you published your Nepal-related books, articles and essays? Please attach a list of your relevant publications with full publication details.*

I published several books. My articles were published in various journals. Both are listed at the end of this text.

*Do you converse productively (intellectually speaking) with colleagues doing research and other works (say development or human rights monitoring, etc.) related to Nepal in the UK, other parts of the world and Nepal? If so, how (via email, letters, face to face conversations, exchange of drafts of written works, etc.)?*

Yes. I was fortunate that while I was writing my PhD thesis there were several other students interested in Nepal, so we attended the same seminars. Dr Harka Gurung was also in the UK around this time, and he came to some of these seminars. Subsequently, there were several associations of scholars specialising in South Asia, including Nepal, and periodical seminars and conferences were held which could be attended and at which we could meet colleagues researching in Nepal. At SOAS, Dr Hutt has been organising regular seminars for a number of years, and I usually try to attend. Nowadays, I sometimes receive letters, papers, emails from younger students embarking on a Nepal-related career.

*What institutional (e.g., library) and human resources (e.g., was your research supervisor familiar with the relevant literature on Nepal?) were available to you as a graduate student?*

At the time I was working on my PhD SOAS had probably the best collection of publications on Nepal in the UK. The library of the Royal Anthropological Institute was also available for anthropological materials. My supervisor was Professor Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, the leading anthropologist of Nepal in Britain, with additional theoretical help from Drs Adrian Mayer and F G Bailey, who were prominent Indianists.

*What kinds of funds were available for your graduate studies and for field research in Nepal as well as for the final write-up of your dissertation? What are the institutional and funding resources in the UK (outside of the UK as well) that have made it possible for you to continue your research and teaching on Nepal?*

My PhD programme and my fieldwork was financed partly by the London-Cornell Project for East and Southeast Studies, (jointly funded by the Carnegie Corporation (US) and the Nuffield Foundation (UK)), and partly by the Education Department of the Quebec Government, Canada. Sources for anthropological research have changed over time. For many years there was the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in the UK which had a social anthropology committee to deal with applications from this discipline. This became the Economic and Social Research Council, but without a specific section for social anthropology. Other funding bodies are the Leverhulme Foundation, the Nuffield Foundation and the British Academy. Some Universities also have their own research funds. At one time SOAS supported its staff quite generously. So my Dailekh research was supported by SOAS, and it also gave a small grant to support the Gurkha project. But SOAS funds for research are now much reduced.

*Was your PhD or your Dailekh research done as part of the 'Social Change in Rural Nepal' research project coordinated by Professor Fürer-Haimendorf from SOAS in the late 1960s?*

My fieldwork in Ilam preceded by several years Fürer-Haimendorf's project funded by the SSRC, and was financed, as mentioned above, by the Quebec Government and the London-Cornell project. The SOAS money I received for my own Dailekh fieldwork in 1969 was normal funding for SOAS staff research. My wife Patricia Caplan's research in Dailekh in 1969 (later published as A. Patricia Caplan 1972) was a part of the SSRC project. Fürer-Haimendorf organized a seminar in 1973 where presentations were made by researchers from the project coordinated by him. Others also participated. I took part in the symposium because I was in Fürer-Haimendorf's Nepal 'circle' and had done fieldwork around the same time

as those who were on the project. He later edited the proceedings of this seminar (Fürer-Haimendorf 1974)

*Several people have referred to the above-mentioned project coordinated by Fürer-Haimendorf as the only attempt in the history of British anthropological research related to Nepal where something like a group research effort was conceptualised and executed. Is that in fact the case?* Fürer-Haimendorf's project was meant primarily as a way of increasing ethnographic study and knowledge of Nepal. Remember that he was the only anthropologist in Britain seriously interested in Nepal, and attracted a number of scholars to the field. But there was no common theme for the Project, other than the very general notion of 'social change'. Fürer-Haimendorf always encouraged his students and colleagues to follow their own inclinations and theoretical interests.

I can't recall any other anthropological group effort, although David Seddon (a sociologist) and a few of his colleagues (from several disciplines) in the Overseas Development Group at the University of East Anglia did publish several volumes focused on West Central Nepal which came out of a coordinated programme of research funded by the British Ministry of Overseas Development.

*What was the job market like for you when you finished graduate studies?* I was fortunate in that there was a big expansion of British universities in the 1960s, and new staff were required. I was actually offered a post while still engaged in fieldwork in Nepal. But that wouldn't happen nowadays. I was at SOAS all my working life (32 years). Today, there are fewer permanent posts and many more part-time and fixed term appointments, i.e., people are engaged on temporary (2 or 3 year) contracts and may not get a permanent job for some years if at all.

*Is a new generation (say mostly under 30 years of age now) of Nepal researchers being produced in the UK? If so, how is the next generation being mentored in the field?*

I imagine there are quite a number of new Nepal-focused researchers, being mentored by staff with experience of Nepal located at universities around the UK. The problem is that if the political situation in Nepal does not improve students may be discouraged from doing fieldwork, or encouraged to do it only in the main urban centres.

*What is the attraction (academic and otherwise) for this new generation to study Nepal?*

Reasons will be varied. Some may be drawn to mountain environments; others to images of Shangri-la. A few may have visited the country as tourists/backpackers or even worked there with NGOs. Then, perhaps the books students read or the teachers they encounter can influence the decision to focus on Nepal. Finally, students or established researchers may want to explore certain topics (e.g., Buddhist-Hindu interface) and feel that Nepal offers an ideal location for this.

*Are the conditions of their recruitment different from the time when you entered the field? How would you compare the institutional and financial resources available to them to become Nepal researchers today compared with those in your own time? What are their job prospects?*

I'm really not in a position to answer this question. My impression is that there are a great many anthropology graduates chasing very few jobs, and that resources are not expanding alongside demand. For some years now many PhDs have looked elsewhere than the universities for a career.

*In your career at SOAS, did you supervise students doing MPhil and PhD research on Nepal? If so, how many and can you please mention their names?*

Over the years we developed a system of providing each student with a main supervisor and a second advisor, especially if the main supervisor was not a specialist in the region of the student's research. I was the main supervisor for Andrew Hall and Rebecca Saul, and second advisor for Stephen Greenwold, Richard Burghart and Damian Walter. I also supervised Hayami Yasuno and Celayne Heaton Shrestha. The latter I only supervised until I retired and then a colleague took over.

*Do you communicate about your research with the national public at large in the UK? If so, how do you do it and how often?*

On occasion, I have been asked to give advice or comment in a public forum, but the occasions were few. Journalists tend not to consult academics.

*What is the relationship between your research and discussions in the various Nepali public spheres? Do you find that there is a tension between representing Nepal to your colleagues in the UK and making your research theme and conclusions 'relevant' and accessible for discussions in Nepali society?*

It has always been the case that the authorities in the countries where we conduct research ask different questions from those of our anthropological

colleagues in the UK. The former are obviously going to be interested in the way foreigners' research contributes to the development or betterment of local society while the latter judge it for its contribution to wider theoretical understandings. In this regard the people best able to 'mediate' between these different expectations are Nepali anthropologists or other academics who can appreciate both kinds of perspective. In my early career there were hardly a handful of Nepali scholars who had a grasp of the discipline; now there are many, thanks to the growth of Tribhuvan University, the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, etc.

What is also important is that our research is available to Nepali scholars and intellectuals, something that doesn't always happen because of the commercial attitudes of UK or US based publishers. In my own case it was only after many years that I was able to persuade my publisher to allow the Gurkha book to be published in a paperback edition in Nepal, and therefore at a price affordable to many more local people. Finally, there is always the danger that the research of UK and other western scholars will be accepted in Nepal as 'gospel truth' or rejected out of hand as tainted simply because it comes from abroad. Needless to say, all such studies should be critically judged on their merits in the same way as the works of Nepali researchers.

*How do you evaluate the state (in terms of numbers of researchers, quality of output, their contributions to their disciplines, etc.) of Nepal Studies in the UK at the moment? Do researchers on Nepal languish at the margins of South Asian Studies in the UK?*

In my view Nepal Studies in the UK are in a reasonably healthy state. There are scholars in universities throughout the country teaching and conducting research, and attending seminars, conferences and workshops where they meet; they are in regular contact with European and US scholars interested in Nepal, and with Nepali scholars. There is at least one university (SOAS) in the country where Nepali language is taught and where degree courses in Nepal studies are available. There is certainly a great deal more activity in the Nepal field now than when I began my career nearly 40 years ago. The only worrying thing is the financial cutbacks being experienced by the funding bodies which support research in UK universities, and this is bound to affect future research in Nepal as in most non-European countries.

It is a fact of life that India has always attracted and will probably continue to attract the bulk of researchers focusing on South Asia, but I would not say that Nepal Studies 'languish at the margins'. In the anthropology of South Asia Nepal is probably more prominent than



Pakistan or Bangladesh as a research venue, and probably on a par with Sri Lanka. I think this is a healthy situation.

*Can anything be done to arrest or reverse the declining support for social science research including research on Nepal in the UK?*

It would be nice to think that a few words in the right places could make a difference, but the cutbacks in social science research have to be seen in the context of the university system as a whole which has lost out in the division of funds devoted to education as a whole. Also the social sciences are a very small sector as compared with the 'hard' sciences, which have always received the lion's share of whatever funding is available. Finally, the extent of support for research does vary with the political complexion of any government. So perhaps some day things will improve. But at the moment, a lot of money is being put aside for the war on Iraq, despite the opposition of the British people and much of the academic community.

## References

- Caplan, A. Patricia. 1972. *Priests and Cobblers: A Study of Social Change in a Hindu Village in Western Nepal*. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co.
- Caplan, Lionel, ed. 1987a. *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Caplan, Lionel. 1987b. *Class and Culture in Urban India: Fundamentalism in a Christian Community*. Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press.
- Caplan, Lionel. 2001. *Children of Colonialism: Anglo-Indians in a Postcolonial World*. Oxford: Berg.
- Clark, T.W. 1963. *Introduction to Nepali*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies.
- Fürer-Haimendorf, Christoph von, ed. 1974. *Contributions to the Anthropology of Nepal*. Oxford: Aris and Phillips.
- Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House.

## Publications

### Books

- 2003 *Warrior Gentlemen: 'Gurkhas' in the Western Imagination*. Paperback edition. Kathmandu: Himal Books, 2003.
- 2000 *Land and Social Change in East Nepal: A Study of Hindu-Tribal Relations*. Second edition, with a postscript. Kathmandu: Himal Books.
- 1995 *Warrior Gentlemen: 'Gurkhas' in the Western Imagination*. Oxford and Providence, R.I.: Berghahn Books.
- 1975 *Administration and Politics in a Nepalese Town: The Study of a District Capital and its Environs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- 1970 *Land and Social Change in East Nepal: A Study of Hindu-Tribal Relations*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Berkeley: University of California Press.

### **Articles**

- 1997 Himalayan Highway: The Local Impact of a Road in East Nepal. In *Les habitants du toit du monde: hommage a Alexander W. Macdonald*. S. Karmay and P. Sagant, eds., pp. 609-27. Nanterre: Societe d'ethnologie.
- 1995 The Milieu of Disputation: Managing Quarrels in East Nepal. In *Understanding Disputes: The Politics of Law*. A.P. Caplan, ed., pp. 137-59. Oxford: Berg.
- 1995 Martial Gurkhas: The Persistence of a British Military Discourse on 'Race'. In *The Concept of Race in South Asia*. P. Robb, ed., pp. 260-81. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- 1991 From Tribe to Peasant? The Limbus and the Nepalese State. *Journal of Peasant Studies* 18: 305-21.
- 1991 "Bravest of the Brave": Representations of "the Gurkhas" in British Military Writings. *Modern Asian Studies* 25: 571-97.
- 1990 "Tribes" in the Ethnography of Nepal: Some Comments on a Debate. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 17: 129-45.
- 1980 Power and Status in South Asian Slavery. In *Asian and African Systems of Slavery*. J.L. Watson, ed., pp. 169-94. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- 1974 Inter-Caste Marriages in a Nepalese Town. In *Contributions to the Anthropology of Nepal*. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, ed., pp. 40-61. Oxford: Aris & Phillips.
- 1974 A Himalayan People: Limbus of Nepal. In *South Asia: Seven Community Profiles*. C. Maloney, ed., pp. 173-201. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- 1972 The Multiplication of Social Ties: The Strategy of Credit Transaction in East Nepal. *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 20: 691-702.
- 1971 Cash and Kind: Two Media of 'Bribery' in Nepal. *Man* 6: 266-78.
- 1970 Education Policy in Nepal. *Venture*, pp. 8-11.
- 1967 Some Political Consequences of State Land Policy in East Nepal. *Man* 2: 107-14.
- 1967 Pignéde's *Les Gurungs*: A Commented Summary. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 1: 84-9.