

## Andrew Russell

*What are the personal and academic reasons behind your becoming a Nepal researcher?*

I first came to Nepal in April 1977. I was eighteen and spending my ‘gap’ year between school and university in South India, under the auspices of a Scottish charity called Project Trust, teaching English and running a Children’s Corner in a community development and education centre in Kerala State. There were four volunteers in different parts of India that year, and we arranged to meet up in the north at the start of six week’s travelling during the Indian school ‘summer’ holidays. June and Cathy, working at different places in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, wanted to travel to Nepal, and I wanted to go to Kashmir, coming back to Delhi to meet up with Tony, who had to stay at his project in Tamil Nadu longer than the rest of us, and travel round some of the more famous tourist sites of North India. Cathy, June and I met up in a small village a rickshaw ride outside the small city of Moradabad, where June was working for a development project run by her host, the very welcoming Mukat Singh.

We spent a few days together amongst the whitewashed, mud-walled houses of Amarpurkashi, sleeping on string beds on the roof to escape the stifling heat in our rooms. From there we went to Delhi by overnight train, to make arrangements for our onward journeys. Tired and disoriented, we spent a fruitless day in Delhi, stumbling around from place to place, trying to arrange accommodation for ourselves, a profound sense of *anomie* gradually seeping over us. We were like country people arriving in the big city – but unlike many country people in this situation in India and Nepal, we had no networks of kin, friends and other contacts to help us (within our limited means) to ‘settle in’. There was an address of someone at the Gandhi Peace Foundation where we had been told accommodation was to be had, but it was full (we eventually ended up staying in the flat of an affluent Indian friend June had made in Greater Kailash Part II, a sumptuous new suburb for the wealthy in south Delhi). We tried to make some

arrangements for onward travel, but mistimed the opening hours of the ticket booths we needed. The dearth of western company we had all experienced in rural India meant that the unfriendliness of most foreigners we met in the capital struck us particularly hard. India that year (the Queen's silver jubilee, as adverts in the windows of the British Airways office reminded us) was still very much part of the 'hippy trail' from Europe, and Carnaby Street cool seemed to have frozen out the humanity of the sour-faced westerners we saw. Shopping seemed the answer (at least to Cathy and June) and we went from shoe shop to shoe shop looking for sandals for Cathy's feet. Stumbling out of yet another shop into the searing afternoon heat, we ran into two friendly young English men who said they were also involved in development work in a village outside Delhi, and invited us to a meal at their house in the city the following night.

We had been planning to go to the cinema, but since there were no English films playing nearby that we wanted to see, we decided (or were destined) to accept the invitation of these two hospitable Englishmen. Dinner was a communal affair of wholesome, vegetarian food, and we ate well. It was a young crowd of mainly westerners – no-one older than thirty – and there were a lot of nursing mothers, babies and children sitting round the table. I was curious as to the nature of the development work they were all engaged in, and during the meal I went to the toilet where I found promotional literature for Moses David's evangelical cult 'Children of God' sitting on the cistern. When we were finished and the plates cleared away we spent the rest of the evening on the verandah in the company of a lovely young Glaswegian woman. She recounted how, after an unhappy childhood, one evening she had been to see the Zeffirelli film about St Francis 'Brother Sun'. Desparing that life could ever be as beautiful as it had been portrayed in the film, she walked tearfully out of the cinema, into the arms of two Children of God members, one of whom had told her that indeed her life could be like that, if she joined their group. And so here she was, in Delhi, witnessing to us about her experiences. One of the men we had met then got out his guitar and started playing Christian songs.

Next morning over breakfast June, Cathy and I argued about the Children of God. Cathy and I were of the opinion that you couldn't and shouldn't accept anything in blind faith. June was not so sure. We went our separate ways to fulfil the various jobs we had to perform before our departure. The girls were leaving for Patna, en route for Nepal, in the afternoon, and I was heading for Kashmir, via Amritsar, in the evening. We arranged to meet at lunchtime in the vegetarian refreshment room at New Delhi Railway Station. Cathy went to the photo-shop to collect passport photos for visas, June returned to collect a promised address of the Children

of God in Nepal, and I went to the bank to change some of my fast dwindling supplies of money. I reached railway station first, followed by Cathy who went upstairs for some tea. Then June arrived, accompanied by two members of the group.

“Did you get the address?” I asked.

“I’m not going”, June replied. She had decided to join the Children of God. “It was the only thing I could do” she explained, with the wistful calm of those in love.

There was little point, at this apogee of personal transformation, in questioning the wisdom of what she was doing. We knew the Children of God were essentially good people, not brainwashed junkies, and June was joining of her own free will. Of more pressing importance, given our financial situation, was to sort out the transformation in travel arrangements. I gave June my ticket for the 8.30 Amritsar mail to cash in as there was still time to obtain a refund on it, and said I would accompany Cathy to Nepal, as she would otherwise have had to travel alone. So that was how I found myself in the ladies compartment of the 2.30 train to Patna, trying to explain to the ticket collector why I was named ‘Janet Urkin’. Since I was unprepared for this visit to Nepal, I vowed I would return some day properly equipped to really do justice to the fascinating cultural and environmental complexity of the country. The next opportunity did not arise until my PhD plans came up.

*What was the thematic focus of your research for your PhD?*

My research focus was on community forestry/culture and environment. This was what I intended to do; my subsequent PhD is much more a ‘perceptions of the environment’ piece, with field research done in East Nepal. This was very much influenced by the (then) current concerns of development anthropologists at the time.

*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 am currently involved in medical anthropology research in the North East (NE) of England, and environmental anthropology research in various European countries. In terms of Nepalese research, I became interested in migrants and diaspora cultures as a result of my PhD research and was able to follow this up postdoctorally. The theoretical shifts in my discipline were helpful in making this transition, but certainly haven’t led it. My interest in the Miss World phenomenon came about by experiences I had doing these diaspora studies in NE India. The current political situation in

East Nepal would make it quite unsafe for me to return, and I now have dependents that I did not have when I conducted my PhD research to whom I feel a responsibility of safety.

I'm afraid my interest transitions aren't so ordered and explicable (by me at any rate!). Certainly my medical anthropology interests pre-dated my interest in Nepal as a research area, and were not pursued there. Moving to the NE of England to take up a teaching post meant I could take up research possibilities in medical anthropology that were limited in the field of environmental anthropology.

*Do you operate from a traditionally defined department or from an area studies centre?*

I am a Lecturer in the Anthropology Department at the University of Durham but my undergraduate teaching is primarily at Queen's Campus Stockton. I have been at Durham since 1992.

*What kinds of courses do you teach (or have taught in the past) and what Nepal-related content are included in those courses?*

Currently teach social sciences to 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year medical students. Also involved with Human Sciences undergraduates, and masters and PhD postgraduates. Nepal-related content tends to be illustrative rather than central. Medical students are concerned with 'relevance' – everything has to be geared to their chosen vocation. They are intellectually bright and stimulating to teach. Anthropology students tend to be interested in 'anthropology for anthropology's sake'. Have not supervised any Nepal related research since being here.

*Where have you published your Nepal-related books, articles and essays?*

My articles have been published in journals such as *Journeys*, *Himal*, *Anthropology Today*, and *Himalayan Research Bulletin* and several books. I have provided a list at the end of this text.

*Do you converse productively with colleagues doing research and other works related to Nepal ? If so, how?*

I converse via e-mail nowadays. During my PhD, I conversed with colleagues at Oxford and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and Nepalese scholars in the UK. I have also corresponded with Nepalese and non-Nepalese scholars met during PhD research in Nepal. I have attended South Asian Anthropologists Group day conferences and seminars at SOAS (limited these days by no longer being in the 'golden triangle' of London/Oxford/Cambridge).

*What institutional and human resources were available to you as a graduate student?*

My supervisor was Nicholas Allen at Oxford. Nick was a fantastic supervisor. He was not familiar with my research theme (environment) but certainly with the relevant literature. He suggested the Yakha as a research 'group'. The Indian Institute Library and the departmental library facilities at Oxford were good. I also had access to SOAS library through taking Nepali course with David Matthews and Michael Hutt as an external student for a year.

*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?*

I had an Economic and Social Research Council CASS (Collaborative Awards in the Social Sciences) studentship. That meant that I had to finish my PhD in five years maximum. A Leverhulme Award funded the subsequent postdoctoral research.

*What was the job market like for you when you finished your PhD? How many times have you changed jobs since your first post-PhD appointment? Is your current job a 'permanent' one? What is the job market like for future advancement?*

I have been lucky. Although the job market was very difficult, I was fortunate with my interests in medical anthropology and environmental/development anthropology to get a post at Durham, where a new campus was just starting up. I have stayed here ever since, and am on a 'non-fixed term' contract. Job market for future advancement in anthropology is bad but it is good in medical education.

*Is a new generation of Nepal researchers being produced in the UK? If so, how is the next generation being mentored in the field?*

Very few Nepal researchers are being produced as a result of the general problems in recruitment into higher education and anthropology in particular. See an article by Paul Sillitoe (2003) in *Anthropology Today* on this subject.

*What is the attraction for this new generation to study Nepal?*

Same as in the past, I'm sure – the attractiveness of the country, the cultural and linguistic complexity.

*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?*

I've been on the BBC World Service, talking about Miss World in India. I have also given a talk at the Britain-Nepal Society.

*What is the relationship between your current or past 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?*

Interesting question. I have always said that I would like to write a book of and for the Yakha, something that was accessible to them and would help to 'put them on the map' so to speak. It would be something more 'National Geographic' in style rather than 'American Anthropologist'? However, it is a fine balance to try and produce something that crosses 'academic' and 'less-academic' genres in this way. I was delighted to do the *Himal* article (1998) on Miss World. Even the *Anthropology Today* article (1997) was an attempt to reach a wider audience than 'academic refereed journals' (it is academic, but not refereed).

*How has the availability of many Nepali newspapers in the Internet impacted your work as a Nepal researcher based in the UK? Are their contents of research value?*

Potentially, hugely! However, since I haven't been actively involved in Nepal research over the past few years I haven't tried to access them yet.

*How do you evaluate the state of Nepal Studies in the UK at the moment? Do researchers on Nepal languish at the margins of South Asian Studies in the UK?*

Considering the relative paucity of money in higher education in general, and for regional/anthropological studies in particular, I think the quality of Nepal research in the UK at the moment is surprisingly good. I attribute this good quality to individuals with academic talents who have decided to stick to their fields despite great odds. Nepal researchers don't tend to languish – their voices are heard at relevant conferences etc.

*There is a general sense that support for social science research is declining in the UK. If you agree with this reading, can you suggest some ways to arrest this trend so that its negative impact on Nepal Studies can be reversed?*

For the UK, it is important to focus on and popularize the strengths of anthropology: cross cultural understanding; internationalism; holistic approaches. A lot could be done by setting up some kind of exchange scheme, such as currently exists between 'Commonwealth' countries and the UK, so that gifted scholars in Nepal and in the UK can mutually benefit. The Commonwealth Universities exchange brings scholars at different stages together on joint projects.

### References

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