

T. Louise Brown

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.

I came to the study of Nepal in a circuitous manner. I lived in Nepal during the early 1990s for non-academic reasons (my husband was working in Kathmandu). While there I became interested in the country, its people and its history and politics. I think it is a familiar story! Nepal exercises a lifelong attraction for many.

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

I am an aberration: an academic who has not done a PhD! My specialist area is gender issues and although I try to keep a multi-disciplinary approach, I work (at least these days) within sociology.

I studied history as an undergraduate at the University of Birmingham and, apart from this, I have had no formal academic training. When I left university in the mid 1980s I worked as a researcher in industry and did a variety of short-term jobs. I wrote my first book (an undergraduate text for the publishing company Routledge) when my daughter was born. It was about the Vietnam War, which I studied as my special subject at undergraduate level.

The book on Nepal, *The Challenge to Democracy in Nepal: A Political History* (1996) grew out of my experience of living in Kathmandu during 1990 and 1991. When I first arrived in Nepal, I never thought I would one day write about the country. When I came back to the UK I approached Routledge with the idea for a book and Professor Michael Leifer (editor of Routledge's Politics in Asia series) suggested that it be included in his series. He also suggested alterations to the format. It took a long time to write the book because, at that point, I had three small children and very little time – and I also had to make another trip back to Nepal. It was a wonder I ever finished it!

What is your research focus now?

Gender issues particularly those related to health, social exclusion and sexuality. I have been working on Pakistan in particular. This shift can be explained by a number of factors: my own personal interest, the requirements and interests of the university in which I work, and the general interest in these subjects outside academia (especially international agencies etc). It would not have been possible for me to continue to work solely, or even principally, on Nepal and to retain my post.

In order to retain a post in most universities in the UK you have to research and publish. Your research also has to 'fit' within the research profile of the department. This is supposedly to create synergies between colleagues working on related themes and also to ensure that your research is beneficial to the department's undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. Working on Nepal, in anything other than a university or department that specialises in the country, would be foolhardy. In terms of the politics of university life (often an unpleasantly backbiting world) this would not be wise.

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

I work in a small Institute for Asian Studies that draws on social science expertise related to Asia throughout the University of Birmingham. In practice I also teach in the Sociology Department. The Institute was founded originally as the Japan Centre in the early 1990s. It coordinated the University's relations with Japan (exchange agreements, links with Japanese business, etc.). The Japan Centre was incorporated within the Institute for Asian Studies, which was created three years ago. The rationale for the Institute was to provide a focus for all Asia-related teaching and research in the Social Sciences.

Do you teach and if so, at what level? What kinds of courses do you teach (or have taught in the past) and what Nepal-related content are included in those courses?

I teach at undergraduate and postgraduate level. I teach a social science-based introduction to Asia for first year students, a second level course on South Asian societies and a final year course on sexuality and society. At postgraduate level I supervise research and contribute to taught courses. My supervision areas tend to cover sexuality, gender within Asia and aspects of South Asian societies. In the first year we do case studies on Nepal. These are to give concrete examples to support the theoretical work. I lecture on the transition to democracy in Nepal (within

the context of Nepali history and social and political modernisation); on poverty and development in Nepal and on the uses (or not!) of development assistance.

Nepal features heavily in the second year course on South Asian Societies. In particular I focus on ethnicity and migration but Nepal usually appears in all of the lectures and classes on religion, gender, family, consumerism, social stratification etc. I supervise final year dissertations on Nepal in Sociology and History. There are usually one or perhaps two students every year. This year the students are researching and writing on reproductive rights in Nepal and female migration into India.

Where have you published your Nepal-related books, articles and essays?
My book, *The Challenge to Democracy in Nepal: A Political History*, was published in 1996. From 1996-1998 I was the author of the Nepal Country Reports and Profiles for the Economist Intelligence Unit.

Do you converse productively with colleagues doing research and other works related to Nepal in the UK, other parts of the world and Nepal?
Very rarely as I am not actively engaged in research on Nepal at the moment. While working on the above-mentioned book, I exchanged notes with Nepal researchers, but perhaps not as much as I should and definitely not as much as I would do now, especially with the aid of the Internet. Remember that when I wrote this book (over a long period of time in the early 1990s) I was not employed as an academic and was not part of any Nepal-related academic networks.

What institutional and human resources were available to you while you did the research for and writing of your Nepal book?

I used the British Library and Interlibrary Loan Services at the University of Birmingham.

What kinds of funds were available for your research on Nepal? What are the institutional and funding resources in the UK that have made it possible for you to incorporate Nepal related materials in your teaching?

There are few funding resources available. I still teach on Nepal by incorporating lectures and seminars on a variety of topics into courses on South Asian society or introductions to Asia but, to a great extent, this is only possible because I work on other areas that are supported by funding. My work is supported by funding bodies such as the British Academy and the Nuffield Foundation.

What was the job market like for you when you first looked for an academic position? How many times have you changed jobs since your first appointment? Is your current job a 'permanent' one? What is the job market like for future advancement?

The job market was very tight when I started looking for a post about 7 years ago. I took a post that was not related to Nepal as it was far more general. I have remained in the same institution since then but my teaching and research has changed substantially. My current job is permanent and the future looks positive.

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

There are very few students focussing on Nepal in my own institution. There tends to be a small number who are very interested and who do their final year dissertations on some aspect of Nepal. These students make up in effort and enthusiasm for their lack of numbers. I taught a student in the early part of my academic career (c.1996) who has gone on to do a PhD on Nepal. I hope one of my current students, now working on reproductive rights, will also be going on to do a PhD. I will be advising her to go to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

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

It appears to be a personal interest as a result of travel to Nepal that is then followed by study.

Do you communicate about your research with the national public at large in the UK?

I do not communicate about research on Nepal these days because I do so little. I hope however, that this will change in the near future.

What is the relationship between your current or past research and discussions in the various Nepali public spheres?

Not much. However I have been told that my 1996 book has been received well in Nepal. Its concluding chapter was translated into Nepali and published in the Nepali-language bimonthly magazine *Himal* in 1998. It apparently drew some responses from readers in the subsequent issue of the magazine.

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?

In some ways this is good: we can access news quickly. Its downside is that when we have limited time we concentrate on day-to-day events rather than the bigger picture and more considered thought. However, this is more a problem of academics' time management than an imposition of the Internet. Though the quality of the newspapers varies, and their contents may not be of high research value, I consider their availability to be a very positive thing.

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?

Study on Nepal is definitely on the periphery of South Asian Studies. Sadly, in my own institution it is not considered important. It is for this reason that I had to move to other topics and areas. In my institution Pakistan is considered more important – although my work does range more widely than just Pakistan. It may be because of the Pakistani diaspora in the UK but probably it is also for strategic reasons. However, like Nepal, Pakistan does not carry the same weight as India. I'm still working on the periphery. What is considered important are the countries that are wealthy and/or have significant economic potential. These days China is the country to study. Ten years ago it was Japan. The research follows the money!

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?

Funding is increasingly Europe focussed and is driven by commercial interests and by an agenda that is set by politicians rather than academics. I wish I had some idea as to how we could reverse this but it seems to run in parallel with the greater superficiality and commercialisation of all aspects of life.

Publications

- 1998 Nepali Prajatantraka Cunautiharu (Translation of Ch 8 – “Conclusion: The Prospects for Democracy in Nepal” of the 1996 book). *Himal* 8(2): 16-22.
 1996 *The Challenge to Democracy in Nepal: A Political History*. London: Routledge.