Celayne Heaton Shrestha

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

I was introduced to Nepal by my husband, a Nepali national living in the UK. My first visit to Nepal was in 1994, when I did some voluntary work for some NGOs involved in rural development. The following year, I applied to do a MPhil/PhD degree, focusing on Nepal, and started the research programme in October 1995.

I completed a masters' degree in social anthropology from the School of Oriental and African Studeis (SOAS) in 1993. My first degree (BA) was in archaeology, at the Institute of Archaeology, University of London. My choice to do graduate work in the discipline of anthropology was made after my BA degree, and at the time my intention was to study anthropology and development and to get involved in development work in South Asia. I chose to study at SOAS because it allowed me to study South Asian languages and cultures, first of all. Secondly, I was quite familiar with SOAS as I had taken a language course there (Akkadian) while studying for my BA in archaeology. To complete this account of my educational background, I should add that I was educated in France, where I gained a French Baccalaureat in economics and social science. I started the PhD programme in October 1995, and carried out fieldwork in Nepal from 1st October 1996 to 21st December 1997. I completed my PhD in 2001(Heaton 2001).

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.

The thematic focus of my thesis was the idea of public identity, or the ways in which through their work, national non-governmental organizations were redefining notions of identity that conventionally have been seen as incompatible with the existence of a civil society. The core and main interest

of this study was an ethnography of the 'backstage' of NGO life. In it, I sought to provide a portrait of the NGO world, and the delicate balancing act that its staff was led to perform in dealing with their publics and as they sought to prove their professionalism. Perhaps the following passages, taken from the introduction to the thesis, will give the reader a greater sense of its contents and focus.

"The focus of the study remains 'close to the ground': it takes as its object the gestures and words of everyday life in the NGO, and the main protagonists are the staff of the NGO, not the beneficiaries of the organisations' projects, nor the general members of the organisation who gave the NGO ideological direction."

"This focus was in large part dictated by circumstances in the field setting – my decision to opt for the NGO as an 'entry point' into the research setting, rather than, say, a community comprising beneficiaries of some NGO project – and my position as a young woman, a student, recently married to a Nepali national, a European, doing research for a PhD degree, to mention a few dimensions of my social persona that became salient at different times during the course of field research. I never felt in the morally problematic but methodologically advantageous position of being able to 'tame' informants (cf. Hobart 1996). Like Nader (1972) and others who have carried out research among 'elites' (Dexter 1970; Marcus 1983; Moyser and Wagstaffe 1987; see also Parish 1997) I was not particularly impressive to managers of CART, nor EEDC (pseudonyms of the NGOs I studied); their attempts to manage my prying, however, does indicate that I represented some threat to the organisation. I was amicably excluded from 'serious matters': my conferring with donors was discouraged, meeting members of the GA (general assembly) controlled, asking about the organisation's finances, out of bounds. I was directed by managers towards 'the project' as an object of research, was left to glean material for an ethnography of an NGO from the (arguably) innocuous happenings of everyday life in the NGO…." (Heaton 2001: 15-16).

"NGOs in Nepal were at the time of research facing what a news article (Yogi 1996) termed an 'identity crisis'. NGOs were generally suspected and often publicly accused of narrow self-interest, lack of concern for the poor and corruption (Mikesell 1992, 1993; Aryal 1992; Shrestha 1994; Lohani 1994; Ridell 1994; Rademacher and Tamang 1993). The criticism of NGO exclusivity originated from the more powerful members of the NGO's public. At the national level, it was articulated by government workers and politicians, journalists; locally, by members of beneficiaries communities, themselves often employees of local government organisations or local NGOs, often high caste men. The images of NGOs as 'family businesses'

(i.e. closed of access, but also nepotistic, corrupt) and 'dollar fields' (or again 'begging bowls' stretched out to or handmaidens of international organisations, and opportunities to 'make a fast buck') were commonly used to denigrate these organisations. My initial interest in the ways in which NGOs negotiated difference, a concern made all the more pressing by the increasingly multi-sited nature of their work – became refocused on the ways in which they responded to accusations of opportunism and exclusivity. These accusations represented not just an affront to a middle class culture that sought to define itself in opposition to partiality and hierarchy (Liechty 1994; 1996; 1997) but also a significant obstacle to the NGO project of 'serving outsiders'– persons who did not belong to the same community, the *aphno manche* group or the same *jat* as NGO members. 'Making good relations' with beneficiaries as well as local dignitaries was crucial for NGO praxis; fieldworkers pointed out that their ability to convince and talk 'sweetly' with, and be trusted by, beneficiary populations could make or break an entire project, and with it, the reputation of an NGO and staff's jobs…" (Heaton 2001: 19-20).

"In maintaining the anonymity of informants as well as the organisations in the research I aim to avoid providing material for NGO detractors and adverse consequences on individual members of staff while still portraying NGO life in a manner that is truer to social reality as I experienced it during a brief period of the NGOs' unfolding history. In writing of individual foibles and failures – and I have included my own – I reacted against the exaggerated romanticism of many accounts of NGO life. But ultimately, I also hope to have been able to understand – and the text to capture – the more heroic moments of this life." (Heaton 2001: 70).

While I had had an interest in development for some time, these ideas were reinforced by initial discussions with Nepali scholars at Tribhuvan University (TU) in 1994-5. I had the chance to meet Prof Gopal Singh Nepali and Dr Krishna Bhattachan amongst others, and the point that western scholars have a tendency to 'push Nepal to the skies' in orientalist vein, was forcefully made and left an impression on me. I was recommended some readings by Dr Bhattachan, and given a paper on his work on ethnopolitics. Another influence of my choice of subject matter (identity, caste, ethnicity and so on) was my work with NGOs in the Eastern Tarai in 1994-5, the amazing cultural diversity that exists there and my observation of how the staff of the NGOs talked about and dealt with this diversity.

I do not think that disciplinary or national traditions had a very great role to play, at least not influencing my choice of thematic focus consciously. The thematic focus arose out of questions that I myself had about what I was observing in Nepal and a concern not to 'push Nepal to

the skies'. The choice of Nepal as a research site, finally, arose out of personal rather than academic/intellectual considerations.

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 not doing research on Nepal at the present time. I am working as part of a team on a research project in education and Information Communications Technology (ICT) in the UK at Kingston University in Southeast England. The reasons for this are financial, as the PhD has left me with significant debts and positions that are focused on research in South Asia, let alone Nepal, are comparatively few.

I am currently working in a university environment. The project is externally funded but involves researching current teaching and learning practice within a university. The current project is not so much related to the contents of my dissertation but rather the process of its production, i.e. its location within a particular kind of educational tradition and establishment. While producing the dissertation, I became involved in the running of a student-led seminar at SOAS (e@tm), co-founded a postgraduate journal (then paper-based, it is now an online journal, anthropologymatters.com), attempted to write short articles on these experiences, and this led to an interest in academic culture. You could say that education was a secondary interest, but after months of looking for employment in areas relating to my prior interests, and noticing week after week that jobs were aplenty in the field of education, I decided to make this my primary focus.

Where have you published your Nepal-related books, articles and essays?
I have just published one article. It is listed at the end of this text.

Do you converse productively with colleagues doing research and other works related to Nepal in the UK, other parts of the world and Nepal? If so, how?
I am in contact with other UK based Nepal researchers, with whom I developed contacts during my PhD research, but the basis of these contacts is friendship rather than work or research. Contact is occasional and mostly face-to-face. When I was doing my dissertation, I did engage in discussion with other Nepal researchers, but mostly postgraduate researchers, and mostly those located in London at University College London and SOAS.

What institutional and human resources were available to you as a graduate student?
As I was based at SOAS, I had good access to library sources and scholars familiar with the Nepali language and the literature on Nepal. My research was supervised initially by Prof Lionel Caplan, and Dr Andrew Turton and, after Prof Caplan retired, Dr Andrew Turton and Dr David Mosse. I had close contact with Dr Michael Hutt, who taught me Hindi during my MA at SOAS and then Nepali Language at intermediate level (together with Dr David Matthews) and a course entitled 'Foundations of Nepali Culture'. I also tried to attend presentations at the Himalayan Research Forum convened by Dr Michael Hutt.

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?
I was mostly self-funded. I did self-fund both studies at SOAS and in Nepal, which, as I mentioned before was onerous indeed! I attempted to secure funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and then the additional fieldwork awards from SOAS. The paucity of funding in the UK has meant that I have had to change focus and am not able to pursue research related to Nepal, at least for the next few years.

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?
This is my first job since graduation and is for a period of 2 years. I am unsure of the direction of my future career. I spent over 7 months looking for work after completing my dissertation. I subscribed to a number of websites that specialize in work in academia and in development, wrote to a number of NGOs on speculation (meaning that I'd sent off letters and my CV to these organizations even though they hadn't advertised any vacancies, the logic behind this being it's easy to miss advertisements, or some vacancies may not be advertised very widely), scanned the Tuesday and Wednesday *Guardian* newspaper (where jobs related to education/ academia etc. and charities and development work appear) on a weekly basis. I filled in a large number of applications (to various universities in the Southeast of England, research institutions in this region and to Department for International Development, DFID), but was only interviewed by two institutions. The first turned me down on the second round of interviews, and the second is my present employer.

Is a new generation of Nepal researchers being produced in the UK?
I am unable to comment on this point for lack of information.

What is the relationship between your 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?
I am unable to comment on this since I am not actively involved in such discussions at the present time. While doing fieldwork in Nepal, I unfortunately had relatively few opportunities to discuss my research with Nepali scholars. The reasons were in part practical (juggling family commitments and data collection) and in part due to my own insecurity as a novice researcher.

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?
In terms of quantity and visibility of output, Nepal Studies is overshadowed by studies carried out in India, but in terms of quality, work on Nepal is certainly on a par with that produced in other branches of South Asian Studies.

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