Rhoderick Chalmers

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

My academic interest in Nepal was entirely accidental, sparked by my first visit in 1991 as a gap year volunteer English teacher, during which I stayed for three months. I had already been admitted (as an undergraduate) to Cambridge University to read French and Russian from October 1992 but ended up switching to do a degree in Oriental Studies (Sanskrit with Indian Studies) during my second week at Cambridge; the motivation for this choice was that it was the closest I could get to studying Nepal-related topics while pursuing my interest in language. While at Cambridge I visited Nepal frequently and started to read Nepali literature but did not pursue any research there; at this stage my main research interest was Sylheti and Bangladesh-related sociolinguistics. After completing my BA in 1996 I spent time working in London and travelling in India and Nepal before eventually returning to student life in 1999, when I enrolled for a PhD in the South Asia Department at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). SOAS was the obvious choice for me as I had decided to work on research that would be entirely dependent on a close analysis of written Nepali materials and I was confident that Michael Hutt, Reader in Nepali and Himalayan Studies, would be the most appropriate supervisor. My PhD was examined in June 2003.

What is the thematic focus of your doctoral research? Also explain if any national or disciplinary traditions were important in your selection of the topic?

My PhD thesis examines the processes which led to the emergence and development of a form of Nepali public sphere in India in the early twentieth century. It proposes that an analysis of the rational-critical modes of discourse adopted by this sphere, and their extension into areas of social, cultural and political institutionalisation offers the best way of

understanding the formulation of a modern Nepali identity which has proved persuasive to this day. The central chapters focus on the way in which popular publishing built up both a large readership and the infrastructure which was adopted by more discursive journals; the contours, complexities and contradictions of the dominant rhetoric of social progress which they fuelled and propagated; the way in which rhetoric was incarnated in various organisations and social structures, and the extent to which social mobility allowed power relations to be redrawn while other paradigms of exclusion continued to delimit participation in public life; finally, it offers an assessment of the summation of these processes insofar as they contributed to the development of a clearly articulated, self-aware, and delimited sense of Nepali social consciousness and community belonging.

This thesis is based on materials that have been almost entirely ignored by previous historical or literary studies, primarily published Nepali journals and books. It challenges many of the presumptions which underlie traditional approaches to the areas studied and offers specific critiques of a number of influential theorisations of Nepali history and society. At the heart of its analysis is a commitment to understanding the intellectual processes of community conceptualisation and rationalisation as they were experienced and expressed by Nepalis themselves in the period in question. This also entails a detailed dissection of issues of power and authority, of tendencies towards both contestation and the development of normative understandings, and, throughout, of the role of language in enabling and mediating these processes.

National and disciplinary traditions: these were not, as far as I can tell, particularly important to me. It is true that the UK has a relatively strong tradition of study of both classical and modern South Asian literatures and cultures, and that the themes of my thesis were inspired by the work of Francesca Orsini (2002; earlier a PhD dissertation), a former teacher of mine and fellow SOAS PhD holder, but I did not feel that national traditions per se had any particular bearing on my own choice of subject matter. As for disciplinary traditions, there is even less influence: my background was not strictly "disciplinary" in the first place, my major training in Oriental Studies having been methodological rather than theoretical, so to work on a PhD that made use of my methodological (primarily linguistic and textual) experience but that drew on social theory and history for its framework seemed logical enough. My SOAS Department is for the "languages and cultures of South Asia" so also suitably vague on disciplinary bounds.

Now that you have completed your PhD, what are your research plans? Also what are the linkages between your research interests in Nepal and theoretical debates in your discipline and/or political and social developments in Nepal?
I hope to publish my PhD dissertation in a slightly revised format as soon as possible. I am now busy working on a number of separate, but tangentially related papers. These are not based on new primary research but address many of the larger questions that struck me during the final stages of my PhD writing. They deal largely with conceptual questions surrounding the study and interpretation of Nepal, epistemological questions in research modalities, and the role of academic disciplines in shaping the process of knowledge creation and dissemination on Nepal. In other words, my current work is not related to theoretical debates in my discipline, though I seek to add some new perspectives on many issues common to a range of disciplines. My work is not closely tied to current political and social developments in Nepal in terms of its specific output but my motivations and desire to relate academic work to other areas of life are very much conditioned by general developments in contemporary Nepal.

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?
During the first year of my PhD research I taught two Nepal-related courses at SOAS: a language course for second year students and a general course on the history and culture of Nepal, also targeted at second or fourth year students (who may or may not have had other specific Nepal-related teaching). The latter course was very wide in scope and not a traditional disciplinary course.

Where have you published your Nepal-related articles and essays?
The list is given at the end of this text.

Do you converse productively with colleagues doing research and other works related to Nepal in the UK, other European countries, the US and Nepal? If so, how?
With colleagues doing other academic research, yes. For UK/US/Europe a fair amount of emailing and exchange of draft work; for Nepal, email/face-to-face/meetings at seminars, etc. and same exchange of draft work. I'm not so in touch with people outside Nepal working in other areas such as development.

What institutional and human resources were available to you as a graduate student?
Human resources: basically none (apart from, I suppose, services such as perhaps career guidance, counselling, etc. at SOAS – I haven't investigated or sampled these), though I have had close personal guidance from my supervisor Dr Michael Hutt and, whenever necessary, ready access to academic support in the department. Library resources at SOAS itself are very good for South Asia and for Nepal—patchy in terms of overall coverage but with many surprising gems among the older holdings that I was very pleased to come across. The old India Office Library Collection of the British Library was the mainstay of the research I carried out in the UK, and the facilities there are excellent in all respects, even if (not surprisingly) their Nepali holdings are also somewhat limited. Within Nepal, the Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya was by far the most useful single resource for the type of materials I required, although its usefulness will be immensely increased once the ongoing journal microfilming project manages to make older publications available. I was also able to use the National Archives but its more or less strict time restrictions on access to microfilm readers meant that extended research there would have been awkward. As a research student I was affiliated to the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) and given much assistance there by individuals.

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 UK as well) that you have tapped into or will be doing so to continue your research in Nepal?
Funding was a problem: I survived the first year of the PhD with a bursary from the private Bagri Foundation which covered my fees but had to cover living costs (not cheap in London) by teaching in SOAS, working in the library, and teaching elsewhere in London. From the start of my second year I received a two-year studentship from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Board, as well as some additional fieldwork funding from SOAS and the Arts and Humanities Research Board's Centre for Asian and African Literatures. This funding was more than sufficient to cover living and research expenses while based in Nepal but would not have come close to meeting the cost of living in London. I have not received any writing-up funding and have not received any funding for research whatsoever since July 2002.

As a recent PhD, what are your job prospects?

Not very encouraging! The openings for experts in South Asian languages have always been limited and seem to be getting even more limited (at least in the areas of my specialisation, which are not central to the funding being pumped into the "war on terrorism", etc.). SOAS in particular is in (another) financial crisis which is seeing a freeze on posts and the reduction of posts in the South Asia department, as well as potentially a longer term shift away from maintaining guaranteed programmes in specific languages. I would, in any case, prefer to remain based in Nepal for the time being, so am starting to investigate the possibilities for part-time work that would enable me to continue research and writing on the side.

Is a new generation of Nepal researchers being produced in the UK? If so, how is the next generation being mentored in the field?
I am not sure there is a 'new generation', although if there is it is likely (as ever) to consist largely of social anthropologists.

What is the attraction for members of your generation to study Nepal?
I presume there is still an 'exotic' appeal to Nepal (there certainly was for me at the age of 18!) and I suspect that within anthropology, and perhaps development studies, the number of tenured lecturers and professors with Nepal research interests must also encourage students to work in these fields. For me, the attraction of my research to date and the factor which leads me to continue planning more and more research and writing on Nepal, is that there seem to be many fertile areas of investigation that have been hardly touched and which could contribute much to better understanding of Nepal itself and to wider interdisciplinary and theoretical debates. Apart from academic reasons, Nepal remains one of the easiest places for foreigners to live and work: the cost of living is cheap and foreign visitors and academics (apart, of course, from Indian or black people) still seem to be the recipients of vast measures of unearned deference and respect—much more soothing to the ego than the underfunded and stressful existence in UK universities.

Do you communicate about your research with the national public at large in the UK and in other countries of the West? If so, how do you do it and how often?
With national public of UK/West: no.

What is the relationship between your research interests and discussions in the various Nepali public spheres? Do you find that there is a tension between representing Nepal to your colleagues in Europe and making

your research theme and conclusions 'relevant' and accessible for discussions in Nepali society?

I think my research interests are in many ways closely tied to some themes of public discussion in Nepal, though hardly limited by them – more often prompted by a sense of what is lacking and needing to be addressed as it is unsaid or unstudied. I am a regular consumer of Nepali print media (as well as international media via the internet) and frequently draw on current journalism for ideas, thoughts, or occasionally for illustrative material in my academic work (my PhD made references to at least five newspaper articles from the last year). I enjoy participating in various local discussion forums in Nepal and have attended and made my own presentations at CNAS, Martin Chautari, and Nepal Research Centre, as well as various one-off seminars and conferences.

I do not feel a 'tension' between representing Nepal in Europe and discussions in Nepal respectively but I am increasingly aware of the differences between the various audiences for academic work and its derivatives. Despite all the recent focus on interdisciplinary work, most disciplines in the UK still spend most time talking to themselves. As a student from a tiny, and perhaps dying, discipline, I am not used to feeling that there is any sizeable natural constituency/audience for my research in the UK, although I certainly hope to be able to tailor output to particular western academic audiences. I feel very strongly that the potential for productive academic engagement in terms of public discussions, etc. is becoming much stronger in Nepal itself. This is especially the case for the sort of research I have been engaged in, much of which is tied to a close reading of language, literature and historical topics (as well as plain experience of contemporary Kathmandu Nepali society) that relatively few foreign academics can engage with in detail. While working on literature, for example, even if in social terms rather than aesthetic, apart from talking to my PhD supervisor (Michael Hutt), discussion with academics and interested lay people in Nepal or India is the only option for stimulating interaction based on deep acquaintance with Nepali written sources. There are many depressing trends in Nepali education, not least the sidelining of history, literature and other humanities and social science disciplines for the sake of a rush to sociology/anthropology, Information Technology, business/commerce, etc. Nevertheless, whatever the problems with infrastructure, funding, etc., the potential for advanced academic discussion within Nepal seems to have grown immensely in the space of a few decades and will surely grow further: this is an exciting and encouraging prospect.

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

Very useful (though primarily for those based outside Nepal – I still prefer to read printed newspapers and journals wherever possible). Research value – definitely! Will be even better if we ever manage to channel archives into a standard font and produce the sort of search tools available in English-language archives to enable key-word (or indeed, much more sophisticated) searches through a wide range of journalism, sorted by various factors.

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?

It is easy to assume that Nepal Studies are terribly marginalised but the picture in the UK seems surprisingly healthy in many respects. There are many senior scholars with Nepal expertise teaching in major UK universities and since my undergraduate days there always seem to have been several graduate students in anthropology at any point in time doing PhD research on Nepal. I do, however, feel a vague dissatisfaction with the narrow range of studies of Nepal which have emerged from among the humanities and social sciences in the UK in the last couple of decades. As I have commented elsewhere (particularly in my thesis), the lack of work in disciplines such as history and literary studies (apart from the very few exceptions such as the considerable individual output of John Whelpton and Michael Hutt) is particularly disappointing as there seem to be so many areas of potential study which could provide scholars in other disciplines with useful perspectives and secondary sources. Nepal is not generally considered to be a necessary part of South Asian Studies programmes in the UK, except for in SOAS. In most other universities it would appear that Nepal gains a higher profile when there happen to be dedicated and productive Nepal-focused lecturers in place. This does contribute indirectly to encouraging further research by graduate students but is hardly a structural guarantee that Nepal will remain well covered at all times. In terms of most disciplines, therefore, I think "marginal" would be a fair description for Nepal within South Asian Studies but this marginalisation should not be exaggerated: in terms of its size and population Nepal receives a fair amount of attention, surely much more than any of, say, Orissa, Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Sindh, Baluchistan, etc. That Nepali remains taught at undergraduate and graduate levels in SOAS while other major South Asian languages with many more speakers are not taught at all (even Tamil will no longer be covered from

this year) is encouraging, even if its continued health is, again, guaranteed more by the individual efforts of Michael Hutt than by any binding commitment to perpetual support from SOAS itself. In many respects I think Nepal receives more academic attention within the UK even than Bangladesh (certainly in terms of the output of significant books within the social sciences and humanities over the last 30 years).

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?

I can't comment in detail on the social sciences funding set-up and am not certain that it is declining in overall terms. It may well be the case that the structure for funding research has changed more than the quantity of funds available. I can't suggest ways for changing trends other than through pressure on domestic UK policymakers, a complicated business.

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