

## David Seddon

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

I first became involved in research in Nepal when I joined the Overseas Development Group (ODG) at the University of East Anglia (UEA) in 1972 and was drawn into a programme of research and evaluation – funded by the Economic and Social Committee for Overseas Research (ESCOR) of the Ministry of Overseas Development (as it was then) – into the effects of road construction in the west central region of Nepal. The British government was providing technical assistance and funding for a section of the Mahendra Rajmarga (East-West Highway) and the initial idea was to evaluate the impact of this ‘piece’ of road construction. The ODG team persuaded the Ministry to look more broadly at the social and economic effects of road construction throughout the west central region to enable us to assess the impact of three roads at different stages of development – the Siddhartha Rajmarga linking the tarai to Pokhara, the Prithivi Rajmarga linking Pokhara to Kathmandu and the East-West Highway.

As part of the five-person expatriate ODG team (and with my wife) I eventually spent some two years in Nepal, based in Pokhara. My oldest son was born in Patan hospital in April 1974. I was the ‘sociologist’ in the team (others being a geographer, an economist, a social anthropologist and an agricultural economist). We all learned Nepali and I became reasonably fluent during the course of the project.

I had completed my undergraduate training in archaeology and anthropology at Cambridge in 1964 and spent three years in South Africa as an archaeologist and pre-historian, teaching at the University of Cape Town and at the University of the Witwatersrand – in the first in a Department of African Studies and in the latter in a Department of Environmental Studies. I returned to register for a graduate programme at the London School of Economics (LSE) in 1967 and went to Morocco to do field work between 1969 and 1970 for my PhD in social anthropology.

I was a lecturer in African sociology and anthropology at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) from 1970 to 1972 (where Professor Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf was head of the department and Lionel Caplan was a colleague). I had little interest in Nepal at this time, despite hearing something about it from these two colleagues. I left SOAS in 1972 to join the ODG at UEA and to be in at the beginning of the formation of a new School of Development Studies.

The Overseas Development Group was established in 1967 as an informal group within the School of Social Studies to promote and undertake research and consultancy in developing countries. When a new School of Development Studies was established in 1973, the ODG was formalised as a non-profit-making company, limited by guarantee, with its own board of directors drawn from within the University and outside, and its own semi-autonomous budget. It was established with a loan from the University but it was intended that it should operate as an independent and financially viable organisation. Any surpluses were at that time not retained but channelled back into the University for scholarships and other educational facilities. In 1994-95, while I was Managing Director, the ODG made a bid for formal charitable status and registered with the Charity Commissioners as a charity. It was also then able to retain surpluses and use them for appropriate purposes – including provision of scholarships etc., and contributions to the School of Development Studies, thereby enabling the School to appoint more faculty than allowed for by the University funding available.

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

My PhD was a combination of economic and political history, rural sociology and social anthropology; it was undertaken in northeast Morocco in the period 1969 to 1970. I learned Arabic prior to and during my fieldwork. I became fluent in Arabic and competent in Spanish during the fieldwork. I was registered for a PhD in the social anthropology department at the LSE (with Profs. Raymond Firth, Isaac Shapiro, Lucy Mair, Maurice Freedman) and had first Dr James Woodburn (expert on East Africa) and then Prof. Ernest Gellner (expert on Morocco and the Muslim world – as well as father of David Gellner, specialist on Nepal) as my supervisors. My PhD on Morocco was eventually completed in 1975 (the examiners were Prof Gellner and Dr Talal Asad from the University of Hull).

*What is your research focus now? What other thematic transformations have occurred in your research in the mean time?*

My research focus in Nepal has always been broad and essentially interdisciplinary. I am interested in the political economy and history of Nepal. I am interested particularly in the broad process of political, economic and social development and change. I am interested in the class and caste structures and dynamics of Nepal, with particular reference to the lives and livelihoods and to the struggles of the poor and socially disadvantaged. My work in Morocco and on developing countries more generally gave me a comparative perspective on Nepal and a background in the practical as well as the theoretical issues associated with the combination of disciplinary approaches and methodologies. My wider reading introduced me to French Marxist anthropologists (Godelier, Meillassoux, etc.) and the 'dependency theorists' (AG Frank etc.) and led me towards a broadly Marxist perspective. In the early 1970s I edited a collection of essays by French Marxists, which was published by Frank Cass as *Relations of Production: Marxist approaches to economic anthropology*.

*Where else have you also done research?*

I have undertaken research and consultancy in many other countries and regions since joining the ODG in 1972. On the basis of my initial fieldwork in Morocco, I extended my research interests to the Maghreb, North Africa and eventually the Middle East as a whole (countries in which I undertook research and consultancy included Morocco, Algeria, Western Sahara, Tunisia, the Occupied Territories of Palestine, and Turkey). I have also worked in the Sahelian region of northern Africa (countries in which I undertook research and consultancy included Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Chad), and in central Africa (Central African Republic), primarily on rural development issues. I have also worked on rural development issues in east Africa (in Tanzania and Uganda). In Asia, my research and consultancy has been limited to Nepal and Vietnam, so far.

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

I operate from the School of Development Studies at the University of East Anglia and through the Overseas Development Group Ltd at UEA. This provides an interdisciplinary context for my work. I am familiar with interdisciplinary work and regard it as a sine qua non for a real understanding of processes of social change. My impression is that while academic researchers from universities in the UK working on Nepal have historically been predominantly social anthropologists – with very few

indeed who would refer to themselves as sociologists (I think) – there has, increasingly, been research undertaken by individuals from other disciplines and from different institutional bases which should not be ignored.

*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 do teach – undergraduates and postgraduates. The latter include those on one-year taught Masters courses and those registered for research degrees (MPhils and PhDs). I have taught on a very wide variety of courses over the last 30 years at UEA (not counting at SOAS and before that at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town in South Africa), including: introduction to development studies, principles of sociology and anthropology, principles of politics, rural development, public policy and welfare, rural-urban migration, North African and Middle Eastern Development, South Asian Development (including Nepal), contemporary world development, concepts for social development, etc. Relatively few of these have had a great deal of Nepal-related content – largely because in the context of African and Asian development as a whole, Nepal is of relatively marginal interest to most students. I should add that wherever relevant I make use of case studies and material on Nepal.

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

My Nepal-related books, articles and essays have been published in a variety of journals and by a variety of publishers, mainly in the recent years either linked to Nepal or Himalayan Studies, or by Indian or Nepali publishers. Earlier publications tended to be published by British publishers with strong South Asian links (e.g., Oxford University Press for *Nepal in Crisis* and Aris & Phillips for *Peasants and Workers in Nepal*). The list of my Nepal-related books 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 parts of the world and Nepal? If so, how (via email, letters, face to face conversations, exchange of draft written works, etc.)?*

I have communicated to an increasing degree, as international communications have improved over the years, with other colleagues, in the UK and in Nepal for the most part, although also with colleagues in Europe and North America. I have worked productively in close collaboration with Nepali colleagues, to an increasing degree in recent years. Most of

my work throughout the last 30 years in Nepal has been undertaken as part of a team, but in recent years I have worked more closely, and published, in association with Nepali colleagues. I am involved in various associations and networks concerned with Nepal – including email links, Internet ‘group’ discussions, the Nepal-UEA friendship society, the Britain Nepal Academic Council etc. I write expert witness reports for cases of individuals claiming political asylum from Nepal.

*What institutional and human resources have been available to you to support your research ?*

As a tenured member of the academic staff in a British University, I have always had good access to university libraries, and to public library sources in the UK. In Nepal, there has been access to more specialised libraries (not many) including the library of the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS), as well as to Nepali colleagues.

*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 have been able to fund my research in a variety of ways, largely through ‘development agencies’ in Nepal and the UK, but also on occasions by my own funds and those available through the University. Research is often added at my own expense onto this – the major cost in Nepal is getting there and back from the UK. Teaching is of course funded by the University. Development agencies which have supported research I have undertaken in Nepal have included HMG Nepal, Ministry of Local Development Women’s Development Division, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), British Department for International Development (DFID, previously Overseas Development Assistance), the Swiss Association for Technical Assistance (SATA), Actionaid Nepal and the Lutheran World Federation. I came to research in Nepal as an established academic and researcher, not as a graduate student, which has probably helped a good deal.

*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?*

The job market was a lot easier when I started. I had my first job immediately on graduation in 1964, travelling out to South Africa to take up a junior lectureship at the University of Cape Town. I was then promoted to lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand where I taught and researched for a year or so before returning to the UK as a graduate student. There I

registered first for an MSc, and then an MPhil and finally a PhD. I was lucky to be appointed to a lectureship at SOAS in 1970 before having completed my PhD. I was then lucky again to be appointed to a lectureship at UEA in the School of Social Studies in 1972 (we started the new School of Development Studies a year later and I transferred to the new School in 1973). The next 18 months, I spent in Nepal. I started as a lecturer in the School of Development Studies in 1973, was promoted first to senior lecturer and then to reader and then finally, in 1994, to a chair in development studies (in sociology and politics).

*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 am not aware of a 'new generation of Nepal researchers' being produced at all. I hope that the School of Development Studies has contributed to the 'production' of maybe a dozen capable Nepali researchers who have completed MA/MSc or MPhil and PhD programmes with us. I helped establish a Nepal-UEA Friendship Society, which was reasonably active in its early years (in the early 1990s), but has become less so more recently. Few of my own non-Nepali students, undergraduate or postgraduate have gone on to do research in Nepal, although some have (it would be an interesting exercise to try to list them). There are relatively few universities in the UK where Himalayan studies (let alone Nepal Studies) are really important – apart from SOAS – and few where it is possible to find a critical mass of researchers and teachers in various disciplines (language as well as history, anthropology, sociology, politics, etc.). The academics in the UK who research on Nepal are very scattered. Resources are therefore also scattered and sparse in any one institution.

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

The attraction is less than it was – funds are scarcer, jobs are scarcer, the investment is greater and the potential returns smaller. Under-funding of the higher education and university sector as a whole explains a good deal of this, but the reduction in funding for area studies and inter-disciplinary studies by government and other funding agencies has been partly responsible. Only a very few centres (e.g., London, Oxford) have the resources to make Nepal Studies a significant feature of their teaching and research programmes.

This means that the flow of researchers from the UK into Nepal will always be limited. Most will have come through one of a very few institutions. Job prospects are fewer – there has been a dearth of support

in the UK both for area studies and for special studies of other kinds in recent years – and a consequent decline in the number of potential researchers. I can't really compare Nepal Studies with the past because I wasn't really ever *in* Nepal Studies.

*What can be done to arrest or reverse the declining trend of funding available for area studies including those for Nepal?*

Every effort is being made to ensure that interdisciplinary subjects, such as development studies and area studies, are adequately supported, both by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and by the research councils (e.g., Economic and Social Research Council, ESRC). But it is uphill work, and many centres of area studies have experienced severe reductions in funding over the last two decades. Nepal Studies would come broadly within South Asian Studies. There are several lively centres of South Asian Studies, including both at SOAS and UEA, where those of us involved in work in Nepal try to keep Nepal Studies alive.

*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 give public lectures and talks to various societies and to schools. There is only a specialised interest in Nepal really, although its higher profile in recent years as a result of the conflict has increased interest in some quarters. I work with Amnesty International and other human rights organisations. I work closely with DFID and other development agencies on issues to do with development in Nepal (at the moment particularly regarding foreign labour migration and remittances) and to some extent (carefully) with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) on more political issues. I try to maintain links with politicians and government officials in Nepal so that the findings of research I undertake can be fed into public debate in Nepal, where they warrant it – as in the case of foreign labour migration and remittances, or conflict and livelihoods, or wider perspectives on alternative strategies for development.

*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?*

My past and current research are all closely inter-linked with discussions in various different spheres relating to current issues in Nepal. I have worked closely with some Nepali NGOs (INGOs such as Actionaid Nepal

and the Lutheran World Federation, and NGOs such as Rural Reconstruction Nepal) on various action-research and policy-related topics – including rural change and development in general, with particular reference in recent years to rural livelihoods and long-term change, community development and popular participation, migration and remittances, food security, rural access and mobility (including rural transport and health services). I do not find any contradictions between representing Nepal to my colleagues and making my research relevant and accessible for discussions in Nepal. In Nepal, I have written letters to the press, given interviews, made public speeches and given public talks, and written (or been translated) both in English language and in Nepali language popular journals.

*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?*

Nepal Studies in the UK is limited, intellectually and in numbers, if one focuses on the universities. There are very few full-time Nepal specialists – and I am not one of these. But even looking more widely at higher education as a whole, NGOs and public sector agencies more generally, Nepal Studies is of marginal importance, not just to South Asian Studies but to other subjects and disciplines. Much closer and more constructive, egalitarian (both ways!) relations and critical engagement with the Nepali intelligentsia, privately and publicly – would help give some impetus and dynamic to Nepal Studies and encouragement to those in the UK involved in this field. Initiatives in recent years to create such links (including the recently formed Britain Nepal Academic Council) to bring academics and intellectuals together more generally have begun to show some results. Better links with the academics in Nepal's university campuses across the country (including outside Kathmandu) would help. So too would closer links between South Asian intellectuals, in India and elsewhere, and UK academics and other intellectuals.

## **Publications**

### ***Books Only***

- 2003 *The Peoples War in Nepal: Left Perspectives*. New Delhi: Adroit Publishers and London: Zed Press (co-edited with Arjun Karki).
- 2002 *The New Lahures: Foreign Labour Migration and the Remittance Economy of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Institute of Development Studies (with Ganesh Gurung and Jagannath Adhikari).
- 2002 *Pokhara: Biography of a Town*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point (with Jagannath Adhikari).

- 2002 (reprint) *Peasants and Workers in Nepal*. New Delhi: Adroit Publishers (with Piers Blaikie and John Cameron).
- 2001 (reprint) *Nepal in Crisis: Growth and Stagnation at the Periphery*. New Delhi: Adroit Publishers (with Piers Blaikie and John Cameron).
- 2000 (reprint) *The Struggle for Basic Needs in Nepal*. New Delhi: Adroit Publishers (with Piers Blaikie and John Cameron).
- 1993 *Nepal - A State of Poverty*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Vikas.