

Michael Hutt

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

I date my interest in your part of the world back to my mid-teens, when I began to read books on Buddhism, Tibet, the Sherpas, mountaineering, etc., borrowed from the local library in the small town where I grew up. I wanted to study Tibetan and anthropology at university but ended up studying in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) for a BA in South Asian Studies, majoring in Hindi language and literature. I spent 3 months in India in 1977-8 when I was 20 (this was the first time I ever left Britain), based at a small research institute established by one of my lecturers in Vrindaban, U.P. From there I managed a 2-week visit to Kathmandu and Pokhara, officially to purchase hand-made paper for the Vrindaban institute. After I returned to London I was allowed to take two one-year courses in Nepali as minor options within my BA degree and I also wrote a paper on Newar temple architecture. I graduated in 1980 and registered immediately for a Ph.D in SOAS for which I received funding from the Department of Education and Science. This was I think just about the only source of such funding at that time. I finished my PhD in 1984.

What made you shift your research attention to Nepal and Nepali given you had majored in Hindi language and literature? What was it about your Nepal visit that contributed to this change in academic focus?

As I explained, I was more interested in Nepal/Tibet/the Himalayan region from the very start, but as a new undergraduate student I was required to enter the field of South Asian Studies at a more general level – wisely, I think in retrospect. I think it was my second visit to Nepal, in the summer of 1979, that made me think about research. It wasn't a question of 'shifting research attention': I did not really have any 'research attention' at this stage. I spent 4 weeks in Kathmandu around the time of the Sadak Kabita Kranti and gained some limited insights into the political situation at the

time. I also picked up some of the pavement literature of the day, which I found interesting. It seemed to me then that although there were plenty of foreign researchers in Nepal very few were reading what the Nepalis themselves were writing.

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.

My PhD was entitled ‘Nepali: the emergence of a national language’ and was an untidy mixture of political history, textual analysis, sociolinguistics and literary survey. I was supervised by David Matthews, who taught Urdu and Nepali at SOAS until the end of the 1990s. I guess the theme of the thesis was influenced in some measure by the then rather old-fashioned SOAS approach to language and literature and by the legacy of Turner too. I didn’t ‘select’ Nepal as a research site in the way an anthropologist might.

Could you please elaborate a bit regarding the Turner legacy? Also what do you mean when you say you “didn’t select Nepal as a research site in the way an anthropologist might”?

Ralph Turner was the author of the first major Nepali-English dictionary (*A Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language*, 1931), and later of the monumental *Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages* (1962-66), as well as the Director of SOAS for some 20 years prior to his retirement in 1957. The philological approach to the study of South Asian languages exemplified in his work still informed the work of many scholars at SOAS in the 1970s. It is of course immensely valuable, and we owe people like Turner a huge debt, but my personal inclination has always been to try to use whatever linguistic expertise I may have to understand social, cultural and political developments in the terms used by those involved in them. When I say I didn’t ‘select’ Nepal as a research site in the way an anthropologist might I mean I didn’t really have a transferable disciplinary skill that could be applied first in the context of one society and then in another. I had some background in the study of literature and some knowledge of Hindi and Nepali, and that was all.

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?

Research focus now: I am trying to write something on censorship and self-censorship, mainly in the Nepali press and with particular reference to the first 6 months of the emergency imposed from late November 2001.

I have just finished editing a conference volume on the background and context of the Maoist insurgency. It is forthcoming as *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*, and my book on the Bhutanese refugee issue – *Unbecoming Citizens: Culture, Nationhood, and the Flight of Refugees from Bhutan* – has just been published. As for 'thematic transformations', well, my first post-doctoral work focused on modern Nepali literature and literary translation and it resulted in *Himalayan Voices: An Introduction to Modern Nepali Literature* (1991). The 1990 movement made me very interested in political history (working from literary sources in particular) and human rights issues, I have worked and published on Valley architecture, and the Bhutanese refugee issue has been a long-term concern. These are not connected with any theoretical shifts: I have simply followed my interests and concerns. Because I work mainly on Nepali subject matter, people often assume that I am an anthropologist. The fact that most of the other foreign academics who work on Nepal are anthropologists has probably influenced my own work in some measure too. What I mean is that because the foreign-authored literature on Nepal is predominantly anthropological that must inevitably form a large part of the reading of anyone who seeks to understand Nepali issues and will inevitably tend to influence their approach.

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

I 'operate' from an area-defined department: 'Languages and Cultures of South Asia'.

Do you teach and if so, at what level? What kinds of courses do you teach and what Nepal-related content are included in those courses?

Yes I teach. SOAS is the only institution in the western world that offers Nepali as a named element of a Bachelors degree, and I am the only teacher apart from an hourly-paid assistant. Regular undergraduate courses are Nepali language 1, Nepali language 2, Culture and Identity in Nepal and Bhutan, Literary Nepali, and News Media Nepali. Several of these are also available to Masters students. I also contribute lectures and seminars, usually with a Nepali focus, to other team-taught courses. I supervise research at both Masters and PhD level.

What is the focus of the News Media Nepali course? Does it enable students to read Nepali newspapers?

Yes, and to understand radio news broadcasts. As you know, the language register is a very particular one and students need help to understand it: this is a final-year course, taken after the students' 8-month stay in Nepal.

It might be worth mentioning that there has been a through-put of students in the Nepali programme only during the past 4 years, with 2 or 3 students on it each year. What I mean by this is that there is now a small cohort of students that registers for the degree of Nepali plus another subject and stays with it for the whole four years. A lot of students (20-25) who take Nepali courses take them as minor options and don't take the language further than 2nd-year level. This year, two students will graduate with BA degrees in Nepali (one combined with Law, the other with Art and Archaeology). Last year there were three (with Law, Anthropology and Development Studies) and they were the first cohort to go through the whole four-year process.

Where have you published your Nepal-related books, 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 parts of the world and Nepal? If so, how?

Yes I do 'converse productively' with others working on Nepal in all sorts of different fields and from all sorts of places, usually by email but I also get a lot of interesting visitors! For about 7 years, on and off, I ran the Himalayan Research Forum, an informal weekly seminar series at SOAS. This was an opportunity for people working on Himalayan topics and issues to run their work and ideas past an audience with similar regional interests. Part of its purpose was to demonstrate to the powers that be at SOAS and elsewhere that there did exist a body of region-specific interest in the Himalaya, and more especially Nepal, and therefore make a case for maintaining it in British academic institutions. It had some interesting spin offs in the form of published articles (e.g. in *South Asia Research* and the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*), larger conferences (e.g. a two-day conference on Bhutan in 1993) and an edited book, *Nepal in the Nineties* (1994). This book was intended partly as a statement of British academic engagement with Nepal, as explained in its Introduction.

Also a group of us established something we call the 'Britain Nepal Academic Council' in 2001, mainly at the instigation of the Royal Nepalese Ambassador to the UK, Dr Singha Bahadur Basnyat. Our first chair is Professor Surya Subedi. Anyway, as the presenter of our first annual lecture, you are well aware of this! The idea is to create a shared platform for Nepal specialists in the UK and to encourage collaboration with counterparts in Nepal. We are well on the way to achieving UK charity status, which will enable us to fundraise more easily for specified projects.

You mention the European Bulletin of Himalayan Research. You have edited this journal, haven't you? When was it founded and by whom? What was its original idea and what purpose has it served in recent years? How important a forum has it become for research sharing between European scholars doing research on Nepal?

The Bulletin was founded by Richard Burghart from Heidelberg in 1991, in collaboration with colleagues at Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in Paris and various centres in the UK. The editorship has moved every few years and has now returned to Heidelberg, where William Sax is lead editor, after one spell in Paris and one in London. The British team edited it for 3 years (1999-2002) and I think we were able to build on the solid foundations laid by our German and French colleagues. I think our subscribers (who number less than 200) find it a useful journal, and I was pleasantly surprised to find that we always had more material on offer than we could publish in any one issue. This was quite a change from my previous experience of editing the journal *South Asia Research*. Perhaps this suggests that a regional interdisciplinary journal serves a purpose if its region is relatively small and sharply-defined. I should add that we receive no extra resources and very little credit institutionally for editing and producing journals, and this work has to remain very much a labour of love.

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

The SOAS Library is a pretty good resource for research on Nepal, although the Nepali language holdings are less good for more recent material. Hence I buy them when I visit Nepal! The British Library is a goldmine for archival materials.

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?

As I have mentioned above, I received funding from the Department of Education and Science for my PhD. The British Academy and/or the Research Committee of SOAS have funded just about all of my own research since then. This has usually amounted to covering travel and accommodation costs for each trip. I also received funding from the same sources plus the Society for South Asian Studies and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy for the 1993 conference on Bhutan and the 2001 conference on the Maoist movement in Nepal. David Gellner and I

recently succeeded in securing a major grant from the Leverhulme Trust which now enables us to employ a full time researcher/cataloguer to compile a descriptive catalogue of the Hodgson collection in the British Library. This represents the major part of the huge archive bequeathed by Brian Houghton Hodgson, who was the British Resident in Kathmandu during the 1830s and the early 1840s. I think this demonstrates that it is not impossible to secure large grants for research on Nepal.

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?

It was extremely difficult to find an academic job post-PhD. I would not be in this job at all if it had not been for the British Academy's scheme of three-year postdoctoral fellowships, for which I applied in two consecutive years and succeeded the second time (in 1987). I think it is possible that Nepali would no longer be taught at SOAS if I had not persevered. At the end of the fellowship I was given first a one-year then a two-year contract. My current job is a permanent one, although 'tenure' is now a thing of the past.

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?

Yes we are producing a new generation of 'Nepal researchers', mainly in the field of anthropology. This is so because of the traditional Western academic view of Nepal as a stamping ground primarily for anthropologists, and because a training and research degree in anthropology opens up employment opportunities to a far greater extent than any expertise in 'Nepal Studies'. British students now graduate with debts averaging around £12,000 and have to consider such things very seriously. I would very much like to see more working in other disciplinary areas. I do think there is enormous scope for research in other disciplines e.g., law and history.

What is the attraction (academic and otherwise) for this new generation to study Nepal?

The new generation's interest in Nepal probably converges with Nepali concerns rather more closely than that of earlier generations, e.g., I think we are tending to get fewer ethnographies and more problem-focused PhDs. There is also greater recourse to material in Nepali. This is happening partly because of a much better dialogue between Nepali scholars and foreigners and a heightened awareness among the foreigners that they must take account of Nepali scholarly production.

Are the conditions of their recruitment different from the time when you entered the field? What are their job prospects?

If they are seeking posts in UK universities, the new generation's job prospects will depend as much on how good they are as anthropologists, political scientists, etc. who can teach general courses as on their expertise in Nepali matters.

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?

Yes. For instance, when there is media interest in Nepal SOAS naturally receives enquiries.

But are you usually satisfied by these encounters with UK media? Isn't it the case that they want short sound bites from you when you actually need some time to get into the complexity of things in Nepal, e.g., the royal massacre?

Yes of course interviewers often get impatient if you try to complicate their simplicities. Also, the extent to which the events of the past 12/18 months in Nepal have been ignored in the British national media is staggering, especially if compared to the blanket coverage of events in places such as Israel/Palestine. Obviously, the latter have greater geopolitical implications, but the British have a longstanding engagement with Nepal on several levels (Gurkhas, tourism, development aid, etc.) and I find this lack of interest perplexing. The only real exception to this is the BBC World Service, which I think often covers developments in Nepal quite intelligently.

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?

I have three concerns in this general area: (1) the research on Nepal that is conducted in the Euro-American world should contribute to improved understandings of the most crucial Nepali issues and lead to a betterment of conditions in Nepal itself; (2) the substantial scholarly understanding of Nepal that exists in academic institutions in the UK has not informed British interventions in Nepal as much as it might; and (3) the *kuire*-puja that you and others have rightly criticized in the past should indeed cease, but should not give way to indiscriminate *kuire*-bashing or to the misattribution of base motive to those foreigners whose work contains flaws.

I don't know why we aren't consulted more than we are by our (UK) government. Maybe you should be asking them, not me. The first I heard of the appointment of a special British envoy to Nepal (Sir Jeffery James) was when I read about it on nepalnews.com! But perhaps it's better for us this way!

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?

I would like to question the whole concept of 'Nepal Studies'. What we have in the UK is a sprinkling of people with different disciplinary backgrounds across a number of different institutions who just happen to have a research interest in Nepal. The bodies that fund higher education in the UK wouldn't recognise the existence of anything called 'Nepal Studies'. I think I am the only British academic with the word 'Nepali' in his job title and there's no guaranteed institutional commitment to the post as such. Similarly, when an anthropologist with a strong interest in Nepal (e.g., Lionel Caplan) retires, s/he isn't necessarily replaced by someone with the same regional interest.

Hence 'Nepal Studies' is a field of common interest for particular individuals, not an institutionally-recognised field of study. As such, it is in reasonable health, although it continues to suffer from South Asianist academic assumptions, e.g. that Bengal is for historians and Nepal is for ethnographers.

Publications

Books

- Forthcoming (ed.) *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*. London: Hurst and Co.
- 2003 *Unbecoming Citizens: Culture, Nationhood and the Flight of Refugees from Bhutan*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- 1999 *Teach Yourself Nepali*. London: Hodder and Stoughton Educational (with Abhi Subedi).
- 1996 *Modern Literary Nepali: An Introductory Reader*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- 1996 *Devkota's Muna-Madan: Translation and Analysis*. Kathmandu: Sajha Publishers.
- 1994 (ed.) *Nepal: A Guide to the Art and Architecture of the Kathmandu Valley*. Gartmore: Kiscadale Publications.
- 1994 (ed.) *Nepal in the Nineties: Versions of the Past, Visions of the Future*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

- 1994 (ed.) *Bhutan: Perspectives on Conflict and Dissent*. Gartmore: Kiscadale Publications.
- 1991 *Himalayan Voices: An Introduction to Modern Nepali Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 1988 *Nepali: A National Language and its Literature*. New Delhi and London: SOAS and Sterling Publishers.

Articles

- 2003 Reading *Sumnima*. In *Ethnic Revival and Religious Turmoil: Identities and Representations in the Himalayas*. M. Lecomte-Tilouine and P. Dollfus, eds., pp. 23-38. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- 2001 Monarchy, Maoism and Democracy in Nepal. *Journal of Conflict, Security and Development* 1(2): 93-101.
- 2001 'Bhutan', 'Nepal' and 'Rup Chand Bista'. *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*. Derek Jones, ed., vol. 1: 225-6, vol. 1: 246-7, vol. 3: 1689-90. London and Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn.
- 2000 Unadmitted Histories: The Lives of Dalchan and Garjaman Gurung. *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 19: 101-15.
- 1999 Bhutan: Geopolitics, Migration, Nationalism. In *Bhutan: A Fortress at the Edge of Time?* pp. 72-83. Vienna: Austrian Development Cooperation and Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights.
- 1998 Nepali Seed, Nepali Grain: Devkota's *Muna-Madan*. In *Classics of Modern South Asian Literature*. R. Snell and I.M.P. Raeside, eds., pp. 31-47. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- 1998 Going to Mugalan: Nepali Literary Representations of Migration to India and Bhutan. *South Asia Research* 18(2): 195-214.
- 1997 Being Nepali without Nepal: Reflections on a South Asian Diaspora. In *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal*. D. Gellner, J. Pfaff-Czarnecka and J. Whelpton, eds., pp. 101-44. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers.
- 1996 Looking for Shangri-la, from Hilton to Lamicchane. In *The Tourist Image: Myths and Myth Making in Tourism*. T. Selwyn, ed., pp. 49-60. Chichester, New York etc.: Wiley and Sons.
- 1996 Ethnic Nationalism, Refugees and Bhutan. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 9(4): 1-25.
- 1995 Hodgson and the Hanuman Dhoka. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 5(1): 1-10.
- 1994 The Poetry of Mohan Koirala. *Journal of South Asian Literature* 29(1): 155-74.
- 1993 A Hero or a Traitor? The Gurkha Soldier in Nepali Literature. In *Institutions and Ideologies: A SOAS South Asia Reader*. David Arnold and Peter Robb, eds., pp. 91-103. London: Curzon Press.