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

During my graduate studies I was not initially focused on Nepal. After a BA in Modern History I switched to Social Anthropology. I did the then postgraduate Diploma in Social Anthropology at Oxford University in 1975-76 and became interested in South Asia which I chose as the special ethnographic area option. In particular I was interested in Caste but this moved to an interest in Tribal groups. Not with any clear plan careerwise, I then did the first research degree (as it then was), the MLitt, with a 50,000-word thesis on Nagaland based on published and historical sources. I was keen to do anthropological fieldwork, but I had no particular theoretical focus. During my research on the Nagas I had read widely on the region, including Nepal and always noticed references to the Tharu but no information worth speaking of so I chose to go to Nepal to do fieldwork for my DPhil. I began work on the DPhil in October 1978 and went to Nepal in February 1979 and stayed there until June/July 1981. I was encouraged in this by Nicholas (Nick) Allen my supervisor at Oxford who had himself done his research with the Thulung Rai. Also Alexander Macdonald encouraged me and put me in touch with Drone Rajaure at the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS). After arriving in Nepal and getting registered at CNAS, with huge help from Drone Rajaure I went to Dang and began fieldwork with Tharu communities. I spent about 30 months in Nepal and of that about 22-23 months with Tharu communities. After return to UK I finally completed my thesis and was examined in 1984.

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.

Focus of my PhD was substantive ethnographic coverage of main aspects of Dang Tharu social organisation but this became increasingly tied up

with religion and ritual. I also developed a particular fascination with the symbolic organisation of the Tharu House. Local politics were tricky given that the then Panchayat regime did not encourage that sort of research, but the 1980 Referendum threw up a lot of political issues at the time.

My PhD thesis attempted to take a holistic view of Dang Tharu social organisation, ritual and myth. The first part deals with background history, reviewing available sources on the area and on the Tharu in general. This is followed by analytical description of principal social groupings and categories including village, clan, and household. This is followed by analysis of the kinship terminology, kinship categories, marriage arrangements and the system of prestations between households. Throughout these sections I make reference to rituals and to divinities which are not taken as a separate domain but together form an integral part of the patterns of social organisation. The last section seeks to explore aspects of ritual, cosmology and myth in more detail so as to bring out some overarching features of key social groupings and relations.

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?

During fieldwork I collected quite a solid body of material on oral traditions and came across also the locally published material at that time, some of which was banned by the government. But in 1985-86 I managed to get a grant from the British Academy to return to Dang (for about 3 months) for further collection and translation of various oral texts. Unfortunately I have still not fully written this material up, though over the course of a number of subsequent brief research visits to Dang I have returned copies of cassette tape recordings to members of the local communities there. Since I have remained in fairly close contact with the same village and area in Dang for over 24 years, I have seen a number of changes taking place and my research has increasingly come to focus on these processes of change. My research now includes looking at some aspects of change and during my last visit in 2001 I initiated some discussion with local leaders with a view to doing some genuinely collaborative research/ project, perhaps with a focus around Tharu identity and the creation of a Tharu cultural centre where among other things we could deposit and make accessible work by outside researchers (texts, slides, films, tapes etc.). However, I have yet to get this project off the ground, though initial interest from various local leaders has been positive. I suppose the key factor in influencing my research has been the opening up of freedoms of association and political discussion since 1990.

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

I teach and am currently Head of Department of Anthropology. We are quite small in that there are 8 staff but this spans both Social/Cultural Anthropology and Physical Anthropology.

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 mostly undergraduates across all three years of our undergraduate course. I teach a course on history and theory of Anthropology, and a general course on South Asian ethnography. I include some Nepal-related materials in this South Asia course (see the references section below for some examples of what I include). I also teach various introductory courses. I also act as first or second supervisor for a few PhD students, but none of them are working on Nepal.

Where have you published your Nepal-related books, articles and essays?
The list is appended 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 have intermittent contact with colleagues doing research on Nepal, face to face, and by email, occasional exchange of draft written work. Otherwise little contact worth speaking of with other kinds of workers/agencies, though in the past I have done some development related consultancy some of which was in Nepal.

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

I had access to the Bodleian Library at Oxford, and to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) library and later to the CNAS library. Supervisor was Nick Allen and I started learning Nepali with David Matthews at SOAS. In Nepal I had invaluable initial help from Drone Rajaure. Also at CNAS the then Director Dor Bahadur Bista was very helpful. Subsequently I have always had great help from Drone Rajaure and Nirmal Tuladhar, both at CNAS.

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 have made it possible for you to continue your research and teaching on Nepal?

I had a grant from the then Social Science Research Council for my PhD but this ran out after I got back to the UK in 1981 so I had to earn money in various part-time jobs while getting on with the thesis. In 1985-86 I got a grant from the British Academy to return to Dang for about three months.

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?

After finishing the PhD, I was very lucky to get a part-time job at Oxford Polytechnic which later became Oxford Brookes University. This was temporary and very much part-time for a couple of years but later became a permanent full-time job lecturing. Since finishing PhD I have stayed at Oxford Polytechnic/Oxford Brookes though I have had different posts and have had to apply for them each time.

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 cannot really say that a 'new generation' is being produced. I do not have a sufficient overview of the UK Nepal research situation, for that best to ask others. However, there seems to be a steady but small number of researchers emerging with PhDs. As for mentoring, they would have their supervisor in UK, and also be registered in Nepal with one of the Research Institutes or Departments of Tribhuvan University usually. They would be linked to a Nepalese researcher/lecturer who could provide mentoring in/into the Field. However, I suspect that if one looks at Anthropology researchers then they will tend to find their own research assistants and contacts in the field, perhaps after some initial help from their mentor/counterpart.

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

Various. Interests may be related to religious aspects (Buddhism(s), shamanism, etc.) and to ethnic groups and language groups (Newars, etc.) as well as to current issues (development and politics). I don't seem to be able to get many interested in the Tarai, still largely underrepresented in terms of research (as well as in other ways, of course).

Are the conditions of their recruitment different from the time when you entered the field? How would you compare the institutional and financial

resources available to them to become Nepal researchers today compared with those in your own time? What are their job prospects?

In UK there are definitely fewer government grants/studentships available, but there still are some sources of funds. However, there are significantly more Nepal research staff available nationally in UK Universities than when I began. Facilities for learning Nepali are however still restricted to the SOAS. There are much better sources of information (internet) and journals of various kinds. Job prospects?? Not great on the academic scene but not impossible either. One question is whether researchers nowadays aim for academia. I suspect that increasingly they are heading into other jobs, e.g., working for Government, or for development agencies etc.

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?

No, not with the national public at large.

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?

No. I don't think there is a tension between contributing to different discussions in different arenas. There are likely to be some differences in emphasis and interests but not a 'tension'. Nevertheless I think it is probably the case that research findings are not sufficiently disseminated within Nepal itself.

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?

These sources have enabled me to keep in touch with current affairs much more easily and such sources would be useful for research on current national and political issues.

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 fairly small, but it does include some dynamic and outstanding researchers. It is true and inevitable that we are very small in comparison to South Asian Studies in general.

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?

Rather than a decline in social science research across the board, I think there has been some decline in funding of social science research on other countries. For Nepal Studies, raising the profile through organisations like Britain Nepal Academic Council will be helpful, and I imagine that the recent political developments have highlighted Nepal much more and will feed through into greater availability of research funds. I think that there is also funding more readily available for development related research, rather than for the more obviously 'academic' anthropological research.

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