Declan Quigley

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

It was originally be chance that I came to be interested in Nepal. I had asked Ernest Gellner to supervise my PhD thesis (on a subject to be decided) and he suggested I spend a year in Cambridge taking a one-year Masters course in social anthropology (my undergraduate degree was in sociology at the London School of Economics, LSE). In Cambridge I was supervised by Alan Macfarlane and I ended up writing a short dissertation on the political organisation of the Gurungs. Alan's great enthusiasm led to my reading much more widely on the history, economic history and anthropology of Nepal.

My change from sociology to anthropology was simply because sociologists in the West almost invariably only looked at modern, industrial Western societies. As part of my first degree, I had taken two courses in social anthropology and immediately realised that if one wanted to have a genuinely comparative understanding of how societies worked, the route to take was anthropology.

When I read Gopal Singh Nepali's book, *The Newars* (1965), I was immediately intrigued by their centuries-old urban way of life and the fact that they were very under-studied in comparison with the Himalayan groups. After finishing my Masters degree in Cambridge I met Robert Levy in London. He had just returned from the research in Bhaktapur which would finally result in his wonderful book *Mesocosm* (1990). We had a long chat during which he said it was as if the Newars had planned their social organisation after reading *The Ancient City* (1864), the seminal work of sociology by the great French historian N. D. Fustel de Coulanges, probably the greatest influence on Emile Durkheim. It just so happened that Fustel's book was the first work of sociology I had read as an undergraduate and it had made a very lasting impression. So I took this as

fate and decided there and then that I would try to understand Newar society. And by the way, Levy was absolutely right!

I did my Masters at Cambridge in 1978/79 and my PhD at the LSE from 1979-84, spending two years in Nepal (1980-82).

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 initial question, following on from Fustel's 'ancient city' idea, was to examine why the Newars were urban when most other groups on the subcontinent, at least in pre-colonial days, were organised in villages. The reasons for this became clear fairly quickly (trade routes and use of land to maximise rice-growing) so I spent most of my time looking at the institutions which made this kind of non-industrial urbanism work: caste, kinship, guthi, etc. In retrospect I wish I had concentrated more on the royal nature of Newar settlements but at the time I was particularly caught up with the system of guthis: cooperative associations which regulated a variety of social and ritual aspects of life.

I worked within the British social anthropology department which had been made famous for fieldwork by Malinowski and his students, so there was perhaps a stronger emphasis there on fieldwork than on theory. My own inclination was always towards theory however. I can't say that there was a particular push towards working in Nepal. I think that was just my luck in being supervised by both Ernest Gellner and Alan Macfarlane at different times. My PhD was jointly supervised by Jonathan Parry who had done excellent fieldwork in Kangra in Himachal Pradesh. His own approach was very much influenced by anthropologists working on caste and kinship in India and he carefully passed on their preoccupations to me. This was very influential on my postdoctoral research on caste.

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 do not work on Nepal any longer and have not done so for many years. Once I had published some articles on the Newars followed by my theoretical book (*The Interpretation of Caste*, 1993) followed by the book I co-edited with David Gellner (*Contested Hierarchies*, 1995) – i.e., from about 1993 – I thought it was better to leave the study of the Newars to those who were visiting Nepal frequently such as Gérard Toffin, Hiroshi Ishii and David Gellner. For both health and financial reasons I did not see myself spending long periods in Nepal in the foreseeable future. In any case I never

considered myself a regional specialist. My interest was always in certain basic sociological questions and I now try to look at these in a wide, comparative frame. At its broadest, I am interested in the implications of being human and being social, and how this is spelled out in ritual and power.

One specific change after my PhD was from looking at caste within the framework of Nepal and India to looking at kingship across a very wide range of societies. The argument in my book *The Interpretation of Caste* is that caste can *only* be understood as a form of kingship: all other explanations, whether materialist or idealist, are misguided. Materialist explanations of caste focus on relative economic and political power and argue that those at the 'top' tend to have much greater landed wealth while those at the 'bottom' tend to be landless. Idealist explanations of caste argue that those at the 'top' are more ritually pure while those at the 'bottom' are ritually defiled. The argument that caste is a form of kingship begins by dispelling the notions of 'top' and 'bottom' altogether and focuses instead on centre and periphery. This may seem initially like academic pedantry but the socio-logic of the king being in the centre is quite different from the idea of Brahmans being at the 'top' and Untouchables at the 'bottom'. The logic of the king being at the centre is that, structurally speaking, Brahmans and Untouchables both serve the king or, to be absolutely precise, the kingship. In principle it is possible that a Brahman could be an Untouchable and this in fact actually happens in the case of certain priests who specialise in death pollution.

My interest in kingship has led me to fascinating ethnography in a variety of places across the globe. Some of the most detailed comes from various regions of Africa but I am also looking at Europe, Japan, and Polynesia. What one sees is that the particular complex of ritual and power that one associates with royal formations is quite independent of geographical location. It did not come as a surprise to me that some form of caste organisation is common in royal communities outside of India and Nepal. I am currently editing a book on kingship which comes out of a small conference I organised last year. As well as examining issues which are specific to royalty, this book examines fundamental questions about the connections between culture and social structure and the general nature of legitimation. One particular theme that emerges again and again is that of scapegoating and I plan to write about this more with reference to the general theory of anthropology and the understanding of culture.

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

Last year I resigned my lectureship in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, UK. The reasons for my resignation are the subject of a legal suit I am bringing and it would be unwise of me to comment on this before it is resolved. Meanwhile I have just become an honorary research associate at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford. I plan to use this position to do more research on the theory and practice of anthropology. I have taught at three different UK universities: Cambridge, The Queens' University of Belfast, and St Andrews. From a Nepal point of view, it was much easier to be based in Cambridge because of libraries there and in London, which is only an hour away. While the other universities do their best to keep up a strong research profile, it is inevitably the case in the UK that there is a concentration of researchers and research money in the London-Oxford-Cambridge triangle. It is also increasingly the case that, as all universities take larger and larger numbers of students, the many very good researchers in provincial universities are being pushed into the position of spending more and more time on teaching and administration to the detriment of their research.

What kinds of courses have you taught and what Nepal-related content were in them?
I taught at all university levels from 1986 to 2002. I did not teach specifically Nepal-related courses. There would not have been sufficient demand for this, I believe. However, I did teach courses on introductory anthropology, theory, religion and ritual, and politics – as well as on caste and kingship and a regional course dealing with India and Nepal. I have always used Nepal-related material in all my courses where this was appropriate.

Where have you published your Nepal-related articles and books?
My articles have been published in *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, *Kailash, Contributions to Indian Sociology,* and *European Journal of Sociology*. Oxford University Press has published my books. The list of relevant publications 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?
Not in any sustained sense any more, though of course I ask those friends who are still working in Nepal about developments there. When I was actively working on Nepal, I consulted widely with colleagues both in the UK – face to face, by e-mail, exchange of draft works, and at conferences.

What institutional and human resources were available to you as a graduate student?
I mostly used the libraries at the London School of Economics and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. I consulted with others in London and nearby working on Nepal. I was particularly fortunate that David Gellner also chose to work on the Newars because our proximity to each other in the UK, as well as our different approaches to our work, facilitated putting together the edited volume *Contested Hierarchies.*

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?
At the time I had a postgraduate research grant from the Department of Education, N. Ireland, UK.

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?
There was no job market in social anthropology when I finished my PhD in 1984. However I was very fortunate in securing funding from the Leverhulme Trust (based in London) which allowed me to return to Nepal for a further two years (1984-86). On my return I held a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship for three years. This was followed by a year without a post. Since then I have had teaching positions in three different universities. I do not have an academic job currently and indeed, following my experience at my last university, I do not expect to hold another teaching position in anthropology in the foreseeable future. I hope to get some research funds and, if necessary, will generate other income through non-academic means.

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 able to answer this question. Those who are interested in research in Nepal are concentrated in London, Oxford and Cambridge because of the library facilities in these places. Those who are teaching there can answer this question better.

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 have written on kingship for the *Times Higher Education Supplement* and *Anthropology Today* and have spoken about royalty a couple of times on the radio and at a public seminar. I hope to do more popular writing, but not about Nepal.

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 think it very unlikely that my current research would command much interest in Nepal: so there is no tension!

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?
The Nepal studies researchers are a resilient bunch! My own feeling is that their research interests are very divergent and intellectually there is often little holding them together. The majority would probably affiliate to social/cultural anthropology in some way, but of course a number of other human sciences are represented also. While some would see themselves on the margins of South Asian Studies in the UK, those working on highland communities in Nepal might have little in common with scholars working on 'South Asia', the majority of whom work on India and increasingly on modern Indian problems rather than on issues which transcend political boundaries – e.g. kinship or ritual. I do not have a sense that researchers on Nepal have made a big impact on any of the social science disciplines. They know each other's work but this work is not widely read by others in their disciplines. One of the main reasons for this is that Nepal is typically regarded as peripheral by scholars who work on India and generalists who are looking for insights on 'South Asia' (a concept I personally intensely dislike because of its Orientalist overtones) tend to turn to those working on India. Another reason is that the community of Nepal scholars has never produced a researcher who has had the general theoretical impact of a Geertz or a Lévi-Strauss. There is nothing surprising or regrettable about this. Mostly such impact is a matter of chance and fashion.

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 am not sure if this is true. What I think is increasingly true is that genuinely comparative studies are not as widely valued as a more parochial sociology, history, or political science. The study of Nepal is affected by this just as the study of many other countries is. There is a paradox that globalisation has not brought any fundamentally greater awareness of the rest of the

world for most Western students. To arrest this trend, one would need to find a way to make the study of anthropology generally more highly valued, perhaps by introducing it at school level, rather than waiting until university. It is possible to study anthropology for the International Baccalaureat, but not as part of the most common form of evaluation of 18 year-olds in the UK.

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