John Whelpton

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

Early on in my undergraduate days (1968-72) at Oxford I'd considered doing research in ancient history, which, along with Latin and Greek and philosophy, was a major part of my Classics course. I abandoned the idea partly because I was unsure if my aptitude for the subject would be enough to get me a post in a small and very competitive field. On graduation I went to Nepal as a Volunteer Service Overseas (VSO) volunteer English teacher and taught at Sri Thakur Ram Campus in Birgunj and Amrit Science Campus in Kathmandu (1972-1974). I ended up in Nepal simply because I'd actually asked to be sent next-door to India or Pakistan but those countries did not want British volunteers for ordinary school or college teaching of English. After returning to the UK I worked as a civil servant in the Ministry of Defence for six years but kept up an interest in Nepal and South Asia generally, particularly their languages and history. On the suggestion of Abhi Subedi, an old friend who came to study in the UK in 1978, I started working on a translation and commentary of *Jang Bahadurko Belait Yatra* (Dixit 2030 v.s.). Abhi read through the draft translation with me before returning to Nepal and, after I'd done more work on the background to the whole episode, the book was published as *Jang Bahadur in Europe: The first Nepalese mission to the West* in 1983. While working on this project, I was becoming increasingly unhappy in my job and needed a change of direction, so I resigned in 1981 and started post-graduate work at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. I was formally enrolled in the history department but SOAS has a system of area study centres with membership cutting across the different disciplines and I thus also fell under the Centre for South Asian Studies.

How did you learn Nepali? How have you used it for your research?

After realising Nepali was written in it, I more or less learned the Devanagri alphabet just before I left the UK in 1972 (I think from an encyclopedia article on Sanskrit and a Hindi textbook). On arrival in Kathmandu, I was given an audio-lingual course over about seven weeks. We had classes with one tutor to about four students, which were mostly in Nepali but we could study the grammar and learn vocabulary from our bi-lingual textbook. Although I learned basic vocabulary and grammar quite easily (and have since then actually taught them) my accent was pretty bad: one of my classmates, who was a natural linguist herself, thought that I was deliberately mispronouncing the Nepali as a kind of joke and, years later, Narendra Mani Dixit (rightly proud of his own immaculate English) playfully told me my Nepali was 'execrable'! When I finished training and started campus teaching, I don't think I learned much directly from conversation but I picked up things from textbooks and then got more fluent by talking to monolinguals or people with very limited English. Later on I began using more Nepali with some of my English-speaking Nepali friends, but I never got good enough to follow properly when they were talking quickly to each other. At the same time I kept on practising reading and in summer 1974 I started to keep a diary in Nepali. I still do that today, even though it seems a bit artificial when I'm not regularly speaking the language except on my annual visit to Kathmandu.

Since the *Belait Yatra* translation in 1979, I've had to use Nepali written sources a lot (particularly newspaper articles) and also do Nepali interviews for my research work. When reading, I have to accept that my speed will be much slower than a Nepali's, and when I'm talking I have to try not to worry about all the mistakes I'm certainly making. I also have to rely on people talking to me adjusting their Nepali to my level. Maybe people are a bit better at this in Nepal than in some other places because many Nepalese citizens are themselves speaking Nepali as a second language.

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.

I worked on the political background to the rise of Jang Bahadur Rana, focusing particularly on the period 1830 to 1857. This followed on naturally from the work I'd already started. I think my original interest in South Asia, which got me to Nepal in the first place, was partly the result of the British connection and the fascination with the period of the Raj which is still quite strong in the UK. The main point, though, was simply that I had already lived in Nepal for an extended period. The role of my original discipline (Classics) was, I suppose, to orientate me towards combining

history and translation but that in itself could have led me to work on any non-English-speaking country.

In my first year (1981-82), as well as continuing work on the *Belait Yatra*, I started reading through relevant materials in the India Office Archives in London and also did the first-year Sanskrit course. I was invited to join the editorial committee of the newly-founded *South Asia Research*, which is now edited mostly by SOAS staff members but was then run by post-graduate students with some support from the Centre of South Asian Studies. This strengthened my connections with others working on South Asia (regardless of discipline). My PhD supervisor, Kenneth Ballhatchet had worked on western India and, more recently, on social history under the Raj. He had no specialist knowledge on Nepal, but he had been one of the supervisors for Kanchanmoy Mojumdar's second PhD (on Indo-Nepalese relations during 1877-1923) and he was helpful with background on the (British) Indian side and also in getting me to cut out some of the over-detailed material I later produced.

I spent most of the academic year 1982-83 in Kathmandu, staying with Abhi Subedi's family, but also worked in Delhi and elsewhere in North India over the winter. As well as consulting the National Archives of India (where much of the material on Nepalese politics is duplicated in the India Office Archives in London) I also tried to collect oral traditions in Kathmandu about Jang Bahadur's period, got hold of relevant local publications and spent some time in the National Archives of Nepal and the Jangi Adda records section. Before I arrived in Kathmandu my *Belait Yatra* translation and commentary had been accepted for publication in Ratna Pustak Bhandar's Bibliotheca Himalayica but the series was discontinued and so I approached Sahayogi Press. They accepted, but on condition I could get someone already well-known in Nepalese Studies to contribute an introduction. Rishikesh Shaha's name was suggested and, after reading some of my manuscript, he very kindly agreed to help, beginning a long association between us. The translation came out (as *Jang Bahadur in Europe*) in summer 1983.

When I was back in London, I still needed to go through more material in the India Office Library and writing-up took me longer than I'd hoped, even though my main source (British Indian diplomatic correspondence) was in English. I did not actually submit the thesis until the end of 1986, having had to teach part-time to support myself in 1984-85 (when my grant ran out) and then leave Nepal largely aside from October 1985 to June 1986 whilst I qualified as an English teacher at Manchester University. The thesis was eventually published by Manohar in Delhi in 1991 as *Kings, Soldiers and Priests: Nepalese Politics and the Rise of Jang Bahadur*

Rana, 1830-1857. I can't now remember how many publishers I'd tried before but I think a couple of university presses in the UK and Oxford University Press (OUP) in Delhi. The main problem was that it focussed so narrowly on a short period and (although containing some more general material) much of it was a blow-by-blow account of political intrigue and diplomatic skirmishes. I was recommended to try Manohar both by Rishikesh Shaha (who was one of their authors) and by OUP's Delhi people. Overall perhaps I didn't fare too badly compared with SOAS friends working on the history of other regions of South Asia. Whilst one South Asia Research colleague got her work on Phule published quite quickly (and went on to a distinguished academic career), another two never even finished.

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 still maintain a strong interest in Nepalese history generally but have not done really intensive archival research since I finished my PhD in 1987. Since then I've been working as an English teacher in Hong Kong and making return visits to Nepal (averaging about three and a half weeks annually when I was first here [i.e. Hong Kong] but a bit less now). I focused first on bibliography because Richard Burghart at SOAS had been asked to do the Clio Press volume on Nepal as part of the World Bibliographical Series but didn't want to and passed it on to me. That was later published as *Nepal* (1990). The *janandolan* naturally got me more interested in contemporary politics and I've concentrated mostly on this in recent years, using interviews, party documents and the Nepalese press as my main sources.

In autumn 1992 I was asked by the parents of Martin Hoftun to complete the thesis on the development of Nepalese democracy which he had been working on when he and William Raeper (his co-author for *Spring Awakening*, an account of the *janandolan*) died in the Thai airbus crash that summer. I had never met Martin but we had both contributed chapters to Mike Hutt's edited volume, *Nepal in the Nineties* and Mike recommended the Hoftuns to approach me. Martin's plan had been to compare *sat sal* and the *janandolan* and to argue that whilst the first movement was the work of a small group of dissidents with crucial Indian support, the second was a genuine popular uprising made possible by the increase in educational levels and political awareness over the intervening years. Apart from interview notes and brief indications of chapter contents, Martin had only produced an introduction and a rough draft of the first chapter,

which was based entirely on interviews and covered developments up to 1955. I used mostly published sources to revise and document this, wrote an account of 1955 to 1980, then used sections from *Spring Awakening* with more material of my own and the result was published by Mandala in Kathmandu in 1999 as *People, Politics and Ideology: Democracy and Social Change in Nepal*. Like most things I've done, it involved much more work than I'd anticipated – at one stage I'd rashly assumed I could have it wrapped up by the end of 1993!

In 1993 I presented a paper on national and ethnic identity in Nepal at the Conference of Asian and North African Studies held that year in Hong Kong. I sent this to David Gellner for comment and he afterwards asked me to adapt it as a chapter for a volume on the same theme originating from an Oxford seminar series which he and Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka had organised. Later on they also invited me to help with the editing of the book as a whole and I got Harka Gurung involved as an additional contributor, having already had some valuable help from him in getting material for my own chapter. The book, *Nationalism and Identity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Identity in Contemporary Nepal* was published in 1997.

My major current project is a short history of Nepal, commissioned by Cambridge University Press and focussing mostly on the post-1951 years but covering the ancient and medieval periods also. I have still got a lot to do on this but we are hoping it will come out in 2004. As a spin-off from reading for the first chapter of the book, I wrote a paper on the early period, 'From the beginning: themes in the pre-history and ancient history of Nepal', which was published in *Voice of History* (Tribhuvan University's Central Department of History journal) in 2000 (actually appearing in 2001!). Last autumn I completed an account of Brian Hodgson's political activity in Nepal for a volume on Hodgson being edited by David Waterhouse, who was the head of the British Council in Kathmandu when I was a VSO volunteer. This will be out next year.

The last substantial paper I've published on contemporary politics was an account of politics since the 1999 general elections in the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*. I also wrote briefly on the royal massacre of 2001 in a comment on Adhikari and Mathe's paper in the *Himalayan Research Bulletin*.

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

As an 'independent scholar' I don't come in any category. But when I was at SOAS my contacts tended to be more area- than discipline-orientated and the majority of people I keep in contact with are not historians.

Do you teach? If so, at what levels? 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 English as a Second Language at a secondary school so there's no direct Nepal connection. Whilst doing my PhD in the mid-eighties I lectured for the Workers' Educational Association in England. This is an adult education organisation, actually catering, as far as I could judge, to a middle-class membership! I twice gave a series of 10 weekly 1-hour sessions on South Asian (mostly Indian) history, politics and society. Nepal only figured as a concrete example of a local caste-system (contrasted with the theoretical varna model in the Hindu scriptures) and also as a small part of the contemporary South Asian state system. Also in the mid-eighties I did a little teaching of Nepali to beginners, using David Matthew's course book.

Where have you published your Nepal-related books, articles and essays? Please attach a list of your publications with full details.
My books have been published by various publishers and I have published my articles in various journals. My publications are listed at the end of this text.

Do you converse productively with colleagues doing research and other works related to Nepal? If so, how?
Since I'm not in a university department, it's particularly important to network in this way. Nowadays I use e-mail principally but when I was first asked to join David Gellner and Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka on *Nationalism and Ethnicity* (I think in 1994) it was done by fax, snail-mail and the occasional phone-call. I see people at the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) in Kathmandu once a year and in London every one or two years. I did some translation work for Amnesty International some years back and I keep in touch with them. I also have some friends running NGOs in Kathmandu. I regularly exchange drafts with friends, particularly David Gellner and Mike Hutt because of the original SOAS-link. I also worked closely with the Nepali historian Krishna Kant Adhikari (who now heads the Central Department of History at Tribhuvan University, TU) when I was focussing on Jang Bahadur and, more recently with the political scientist Krishna Hachhethu. I've just finished helping Harihar Raj Joshi with his chapter for David Waterhouse edited book on Brian Hodgson which I'm also contributing to. Abhi Subedi, as I've already mentioned, has been a formative influence, as well as providing my 'home base' in Kathmandu.

What institutional and human resources were available to you as a graduate student?
The India Office Records in London were probably the most important single source for my thesis so London was a good place to be in. SOAS and the British Library are also very good for published English-language material on South Asia. They're not so good for Nepali-language publications and, in the west, universities participating in the US Library of Congress acquisitions scheme are probably best off in this regard. However, as I had a year in Kathmandu and Delhi for research it wasn't much of a handicap. On the human resources side, my supervisor (as I've said) didn't know much about Nepal but at SOAS I had access to people like Richard Burghart and David Matthews. Then the year in Kathmandu and Delhi let me meet most of the main people working on 19th century Nepal at that time. Before starting at SOAS, when trying to decide whether to continue with Jang Bahadur or switch to another topic I'd also corresponded with or met a number of scholars with Nepal links, including Leo Rose, Michael Aris and Luciano Petech.

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?
With funding I was lucky that the UK government still at that time paid academic fees and a maintenance grant to PhD students. Lower living costs in South Asia (and, of course, abundant local help from the Subedis and others) meant this was adequate. After three years my grant ended but I kept going with a combination of savings from my six years as a civil servant and part-time lecturing and teaching.

What are the institutional and funding resources that have made it possible for you to continue your research on Nepal?
Since 1987 I've relied on my salary as a schoolteacher and have never had any research grants. The only real income from my research work has been a little in the way of royalties. I've kept writing (slowly!) but because of work commitments it's difficult for me to get to international conferences unless they fall in school holidays.

What was the job market like for you when you finished your PhD?
Getting an academic job was so difficult that I gave up! I had been trying to find somewhere in Europe or North America – I wasn't looking for a full-time post at TU (a misunderstanding in the interview for *Kantipur*, 13 Push 2059), though I did at one stage unsuccessfully apply to teach English

at Budhanilkantha School. Although Nepal-specialists have made important contributions to anthropology and religious studies as disciplines, Nepal Studies is really on the margin of South Asian Studies in the West and South Asian Studies itself is a poor cousin of Chinese or Japanese Studies. Westerners who specialised on the history or political science side have tended like me to be outside the regular academic career structure. Karl-Heinz Kraemer in Germany is an honourable exception but Jean-Claude Marize (a historian), and Dan Edwards (I think a political scientist, though his focus was historical) left academia after doing their doctorates and Adrian Sever I think wrote on the Ranas in spare time (Hodgson-like) from diplomacy.

A particular difficulty in my own case, though, was that I was already over the age-limit for some of the post-doctoral fellowships available in the UK and US when I was finishing the thesis. I was looking either for one of these or for a regular university lecturer's job. With hindsight, I perhaps ought to have applied also to what in the UK were then known as polytechnics (all have since been renamed as universities), which provided tertiary courses but generally not at full degree level. I really wanted something with a major research focus and with the chance to work with people with similar interests, and reckoned this could only be provided by a traditional university. I did get onto the initial lists for a couple of things – a post-doctoral fellowship in the USA and a lectureship in Holland but lost out, partly because I wasn't far enough along with my thesis. Perhaps the academic job market was also particularly tight at that time (it had been better a few years earlier, I think).

I remember that Christopher Baily, one of the most eminent British historians of South Asia, who did eventually get a chair at Cambridge, was for a long time unable to get a permanent job. In any case, landing academic positions has never been that easy. One of my ancient history tutors at Oxford, who later rose to hold the professorial chair in Classics at Edinburgh, was on the verge of giving up and going into the civil service in 1972 before finally getting his first job. I ought to add that in my own case I'd realised right from the start that I'd probably not get a Nepal-related job and I was prepared to go back to doing research in my spare-time, as I'd done in 1979-81 and do today.

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'm not in a good position to give total numbers but there are still enough Nepal-related academics to provide a lot of support. I've been impressed by students of Mike Hutt's and David Gellner's whom I've met.

What is the attraction for this new generation to study Nepal?
The sheer variety of Nepalese culture, the 'call of the hills' and (despite recent horrors) the friendliness of many people in the country are still, I think, major draws for a lot of people. Again, though, people actually teaching the new generation are the ones to ask.

Do you communicate about your research with the national public at large in the UK or Hong Kong? If so, how do you do it and how often?
The British public is spared that! I do sometimes write to the press here in Hong Kong (*South China Morning Post*, *Sunday Morning Post* or *Far Eastern Economic Review*) when I think some aspect of Nepal is being misrepresented but I think on average it's been only about once every couple of years. Most recently I took issue with a rather simplistic piece on the Maoist insurgency by the *South China Morning Post*'s foreign editor, Peter Kammerer. Back in 1995 I responded to a letter to the *Sunday Morning Post* from Brian Shaw, an academic strongly backing the Bhutanese government case on the refugee issue.

Michael Hutt has noted that "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." Given that you have worked for the UK government in the past, do you have any views regarding this statement? If true, why does this situation persist?
Mike's experience has been that people in London don't take as much notice of British academic work on Nepal as they might. Now that the Maoists have become the focus of everyone's attention, UK agencies have tended to commission new work from generalists and ignore what has already been done by specialists. Why this is I just don't know. It contrasts with the attitude of the DFID people actually in Nepal. Because someone had read *People, Politics and Ideology* I was invited to one of their seminars in Kathmandu – also in 2001 and before the Maoists attacked the army – and my impression was that their people who had worked at village level do have a fair understanding of Nepalese realities.

When I was a UK civil servant myself I wasn't directly involved with Nepal, though I remember being annoyed when a senior official complained about the Ministry of Defence having to pay so much to provide medical facilities for the civilian population at Dharan Military Hospital (I think this is now run by the Nepalese government and re-named after B.P. Koirala). The problem wasn't so much ignorance as not regarding Nepal as a very high priority for British interests. Within the army and the defence establishment generally, people with personal connections to Nepal (or to

the pre-independence Indian army) felt differently, but others took a more hard-nosed attitude. A friend who was a British diplomat in Kathmandu in the 1980s commented recently on the contrast between the high level of concern over the Maoists now and the situation twenty or thirty years back when a 'think-tank' recommended actually closing the embassy in Kathmandu and managing Britain-Nepal relations from the High Commission in Delhi.

What is the relationship between your current or past research and discussions in the various Nepali public spheres?
My interest in politics naturally ties in with the controversies in Nepal and in the past I've commented briefly on these in interviews with Nepali newspapers. I've recently contributed to that via Nepal Watch. This is a Yahoo discussion group run by Sarah Shneiderman and Sushma Joshi and any other scholars interested in contemporary Nepal but based outside the country are members. I'm not sure of the statistical breakdown but it does also include a lot of people in Kathmandu even if most of the comments are from foreign researchers. As you probably know, I take a harder line against the Maoists than many of my academic colleagues and started a vigorous discussion after writing in support of the sale of weapons by Belgium to the Nepalese government.

How has the availability of many Nepali newspapers in the Internet impacted your work as a Nepal researcher? Are their contents of research value?
I spend a lot of time looking at nepalnews.com and kantipuronline, and sometimes follow up links to other newspapers. I supplement them by subscribing to *Himal Khabarpatrika* and can also buy hard copies of Nepali newspapers here in Hong Kong. The internet resources are certainly valuable but I miss Mahesh C Regmi's *Nepal Press Digest*, which was my major source until it folded at the end of 2001. The big advantage of this was that it drew together information from so many different papers and, even though you had to trust the compiler's judgment in selecting material, it gave you access to things you'd never have known unless you had the time to scan all the main English and Nepali-language papers yourself. Before Narayan Singh Pun came to prominence over the ceasefire negotiations I was not even aware of the existence of his Samata Party. Using a search engine let me find out details quickly but, if the *Digest* had still been going, I would have known and recorded the fact when it was set up.

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?

My impression (based admittedly on experience some years back) is that it does languish at the margins of South Asian Studies. However, that's not really true in anthropology, and I think particularly of Declan Quigley's *Interpretation of Caste*, which was a major contribution to the theoretical debate. David Gellner's and Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka's works have also, I think, had an impact beyond purely Nepal Studies circles. The work on the Hodgson Papers in the British Library, a project set up by David Gellner with Mike Hutt and now involving Ramesh Dhungel as the front-line analyst, will also hopefully produce results of very wide interest.

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