

IS NEPAL IN SOUTH ASIA? THE CONDITION OF NON-POSTCOLONIALITY

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Post-Colonial Studies?

There is a good bit of discussion these days, in the part of cultural anthropology that is concerned with the cultural politics of our practice, about how to realize a post-colonial anthropology.¹ This is, of course, part of a wider interdisciplinary debate on the nature, and the possibility, of post-colonial cultural studies, and some of the most audible voices have come from South Asian studies, especially South Asian history, but also anthropology. These debates are not about post-coloniality as a political phenomenon: everyone is agreed that the Raj is over as an extant form of governance. 'Post-colonial' stands in for several other terms, often treated interchangeably: post-Orientalist, non-imperial. The first points to forms of textual representation, the second to the political disposition with which research is carried out, to authorial stance as presented in our texts, and to positioning both vis à vis subjects of research and within the academy. Whatever one may think of a movement that defines itself as post one thing and not another, this scholarship has altered the terrain in many important ways. It is no longer really possible to write in the mode: "The X believe that...", or to be unselfconscious about the political dimensions of depicting other peoples' lives for a living. This seems to me all to the good.

Much of this writing on South Asia has been by South Asians, and the center of the discussion has been about writing from the position of being both South Asian and an academic, being oneself a product of a post-colonial place and engaged in the task of understanding the nature of that post-coloniality by rewriting the history of colonialism, producing narratives that can connect then to now. South Asian Studies in this country has been marked by these debates; some of the participants are

1 This paper was first presented in the Anthropology Colloquium, Cornell University in November 1995 as a preliminary draft. The ideas put forth here owe much to collaborative work with Pratyoush Onta and the discussion of Nepali intellectuals in India draws on his own research. All errors and shortcomings are my own.

resident here. But it also has its own history, an institutional one emergent from post World War II security concerns, an intellectual one emergent from Orientalism and Indology. These histories have not been erased and the fit between South Asian Studies and post-colonial studies of South Asia is not always a comfortable one.

Coincident with the transformation of studies of South Asia there has been within anthropology a more general attempt to rethink our practices and their products. Much of it has been focused on ethnography, on a search for modes of writing that avoid the sins of essentialization, totalization and reification.² More muted within the discipline is discussion of our practices: new texts can apparently be poured out of old bottles, or at least written from old fieldnotes.³ We have had less to say about how we might need to alter what we *do* in order to write post-colonial texts than about how we might fruitfully arrange what we know in new textual forms.

To my mind the most interesting critique of this emphasis on ethnography is that by Richard Fardon in his introduction to *Localizing Strategies*. In his reading the focus on ethnography and the endless talk about “the Other” (what could be more essentializing than that?) is oddly free-floating, divorced from regional contexts, both as places in which we actually do research, and as bodies of scholarship within which and against which we situate our own texts. He finds the invocation of a lone ethnographer and a generic Other encountering one another in the space of writing to leave out much of what actually shapes our representation. The essays in his volume concentrate on the history of anthropology in particular regions, examining how its central questions have developed, which sub-regions and which peoples within an “area” have been included or excluded, and so on. Many of them bring into view the circulation of what Arjun Appadurai (1988b), in a similar endeavor, called “metropolitan theory,” showing how institutional arrangements, scholarly predilections, and theories of the day have shaped the core representations of particular places, call these the “Anthropological Middle East,” the “Anthropological South Asia.” Orin Starn (1992) has carried out a similar analysis for Andean studies.

2 This literature has become very large. Some prominent texts are Clifford (1988), Clifford & Marcus (1986), Fox (1991), Rosaldo (1989). Two less noticed contributions, the first raising raising political issues and the second introducing areal questions are Harrison (1991) and Fardon (1990).

3 Though see Ferguson and Gupta (2007).

But there has been strikingly little response to this work. The main outcome of Appadurai's article seems to have been that "metropolitan theory" has been happily picked up and incorporated by metropolitan theory! His remarks about the spatial dimensions of research have been one impetus for theoretical discussions of space and spatialization. But the questions about how satisfactory are portraits of places that are driven mainly by the exigencies of metropolitan theory that he raised quite pointedly – these have, to my knowledge received little comment. A more serious engagement with the questions raised in this work would seem to me to entail quite a fundamental rethinking of the highways by which we enter into the places we study, and what is obscured from view by the routes we take. Such an endeavor would, I think, pose challenges to post-colonial studies more generally. How post-colonial are they in the ways that they construe place?

What follows is a brief history of the "Anthropological Nepal." It highlights its peculiarities and I should hasten to say that all Anthropological places have their own peculiarities, their particularities. It is in thinking through them in each case that the contours of a non-imperial anthropology may become visible. In this case it is the history of anthropology in a non-colonized place. One might think, then, that we would be well ahead of the game, or need not be concerned with the politics of post-colonial scholarship. But I think the reverse is true. The anthropology of Nepal has been a curiously colonialist endeavor in many respects just because, I think, the condition of non-postcoloniality has not been taken seriously as an formative aspect of Nepali history. The invisibility of Nepal studies in South Asian studies may thus be partly laid at our doorstep, but that invisibility is also indicative of the continuing influence of colonial borders on the ways South Asia is thought about, and of the hold of intra-regional imperialisms even on work that seeks out the subaltern and claims to redraw the map of scholarship.

Is Nepal In South Asia?

If countries were vowels, Nepal would fall into the "sometimes" category. As area studies have carved up the world Nepal is, on the one hand, clearly included in "South Asia," and, on the other, often left out. Every anthropologist who works in Nepal has his or her own set of examples. These range from the minor annoyance, like the omission of Nepal from lists of the countries of South Asia in conference announcements, to the more telling, and more effective omission of Nepal specialists from lists of possible candidates for jobs in South Asian studies programs. When

one was somehow interviewed for such a position a few years ago a proper South Asianist asked her dubiously, “But how can you teach South Asia when you work in Nepal”? Her reply, to the pleasure of all her Nepal colleagues but apparently to the peril of her job prospects: “What makes a village in Tamil Nadu more representative of South Asia than some place in Nepal?” While her interrogator—who worked in just such a village—did not like the question, it is a good one. And it has no answer apart from a history of our representations of the essences of South Asia, attached over time and by different kinds of scholars to various geographical points, but all of them located firmly within India.

The alternative to placing Nepal in South Asia has been to place it in the Himalayas, to constitute a Himalayan Studies. Here the geographical facts are abundantly clear. The home of Mt. Everest can hardly be excluded from such a designation. But what does it designate? This has been far less clear. Various claims have been put forth for a cultural unity, beyond the geographic one. The impetus for constituting the Himalayas as a cultural region seems to come from two sources. One is the recognition of cultural affinities within the area. The other is an effort to create an entity within South Asian studies, analogous to, say, South Indian studies. For some topics this is fruitful, for others it may obscure links that are not based on contiguous territory. The different polities that encompass the Himalayan region have always sat uncomfortably with the idea of Himalayan Studies and work that situates itself in this way seems frequently to try to analyze the cultural apart from these divergent political histories. One can imagine a different Himalayan Studies that took the political history of the region as its basis. A Nepali journalist recently said this to me: “Contra views from the Cow Belt...the Himalaya is the clothesline on which South Asia hangs. Check it out on the map.” It would be a radically different South Asian studies that took this perspective to be as self-evident as he does.

But my interest is not in the constitution of a new center, a new “real” South Asia. Rather it is in thinking about what kind of work could enable the breakdown of the strikingly colonial borders – geographical and conceptual – of “postcolonial studies” of South Asia.

The Condition of Non-Postcoloniality

The anthropology of Nepal that we hear about is dated from the arrival of Western anthropologists in the early 1950's.⁴ Area studies, organized as they are today in this country, are a post-WW II phenomenon. Both then, emerge in the era of decolonization, and an explanation of their contours must include reference to the historical moment of their inception.

The possibility of Western anthropology in Nepal depended upon independence in India and the political changes that occurred shortly thereafter in Nepal. In this sense, that anthropology (by date) is wholly post-colonial. In two others senses it is not. First, and most obviously, Nepal was never colonized, so it is not a post-colonial place. I will return to this point. Second, there was no colonial tradition of anthropology in Nepal.⁵ Instead the early anthropology of Nepal, the anthropology of the period of decolonization around the world, was an anthropology of discovery and mapping. In this it was strikingly similar to colonial projects that had taken place much earlier elsewhere. There are practical reasons for this, though not so many as are commonly assumed,⁶ but it is the effects on the trajectory of foreign scholarship on Nepal that is my interest here.

In the 1890's the Director of the Ethnographic Survey of India described Nepal as a "sort of debatable land between Aryan and Mongolian territory, drawing the rank and file of its population from Tibet, and the leaders, intellectual and social, from India" (Risley 1896: viii). A decade earlier Richard Temple (1887) had declared Nepal to be "closed to the eyes of science." When foreign researchers did at last cross into Nepali territory in the 1950's their "eyes of science" saw Nepal as a *terra incognita*, meeting ground for two great civilizational traditions. Its

4 See for example Fisher (1985) for a good overview of the received views on the history of anthropology in Nepal. What is missed in this kind of amount is the indigenous scholarship that was taking place prior to (and later coincident with) foreign scholarship. Folklore studies, for example, date back at least to the 1910's (Parajuli 2039 v.s., Thapa 2041 v.s.)

5 I set aside here the writings from across the border in the colonial period, most notably the Gurkha handbooks. On that material see Des Chene 1991.

6 The assumptions are that because virtually nothing was known of the country, basic ethnographic facts had to be ascertained. Thus the mapping of ethnic groups and their practices that others have also noticed as characteristic of the early work on Nepal (e.g. Fisher 1985). This ignored what was in fact already known about various peoples and parts of the country and available in Nepali writing, a trend that has continued.

very topography, from sea level in the south to the highest point on earth in the north, and east to west a profusion of hills and valleys marked it as transitional, difficult of access, remote and unknown. In his memoirs the first foreign anthropologist to conduct research in Nepal recalled that the colonial Indian Army handbooks were the only source of ethnographic information, and a sketchy one at that. "When we started on our first tour," he says, "we knew very little about what to expect" (Fürer-Haimendorf 1990: 132).

Three images conditioned early research on Nepal. I will call them 1) the fossil, 2) the interface and 3) Shangri-la. The fossil image is found in its most florid form in travel writing: the land that time forgot, the medieval kingdom, and so on. But its effects on scholarly work were also strong. The main premise was that the Rana family autocracy that governed Nepal from 1846 to 1951 had so thoroughly resisted Western incursions and so successfully exploited the country for its own profit *that therefore nothing had changed during the near century of its rule*. Very easily then, Nepal as it could be observed in 1951 was Nepal as it had been for a century, or even centuries. It is a peculiar view for social scientists to hold, even in an era not known for attention to history, that just because an oppressive government ruled nothing was changing. It is an extraordinary assumption to hold about a period in which several hundred thousand Nepalis fought in two world wars. One might expect the opposite assumption, and I cannot help but think that a deep-seated presumption that if Westerners were not present and active in a place then history could not really be occurring was at work. In this we find perhaps the most thoroughly colonialist aspect of early anthropology of Nepal. While anthropologists no longer actively put this image forward, neither have we done much to dislodge it. The image of the fossilized kingdom is not now itself old history. I take the term "fossil" from a 1993 introductory text on South Asia, which faithfully reports what has become received wisdom and circulates, when images of Nepal circulate at all, in South Asian studies:

its buffer-state function and almost complete isolation in the days of the Raj preserved its fossil status, an exaggeration of that of some princely states within the Indian Empire (Farmer 1993:36; emphasis added).

The second image is that of an interface. Nepal becomes a place betwixt-and-between a meeting ground, neither here nor there as between Central Asia and South Asia; Risley's "debatable land." This image has also heavily influenced anthropological thinking about Nepal. The

geographical division of Tarai (plains), hills and mountains became also a cultural mapping: most Indian in the south, most Tibetan in the north. There are some good reasons for this: linguistic evidence, cultural affinities and trade patterns of those who live in the mountains and of those who inhabited the Tarai prior to massive migration from the hills (a migration I should note that began in earnest just about the same time that foreign anthropologists entered the country). But an unintended result has been to set up the hills, the in-between region as the *really Nepali* part of the country. It has been the Tibeto-Burman peoples of the mid-hills – Rais, Limbus, Tamangs, Gurungs, Magars, Thakali – and to a lesser extent the caste Hindus of this region that represent true Nepali culture as presented by anthropologists.

The third image: Shangri-la. As with the fossil state, the medieval kingdom, this image appears overtly in travel literature not serious scholarship, but its conditioning influence is undeniable. When anthropologists first entered Nepal they went to the mountains, site of the unknown, the exotic, the pristine. The peoples of this region have been studied quite intensively, but until recently they were seen as people who *happen to be encompassed by Nepal*, not as Nepalis. Research in the Tarai region has until recently, been notable for its relative absence. Shangri-la was not to be found at sea-level or among Hindi-speakers, and neither was Nepali-ness.

Newars of the Kathmandu valley have also received much attention, but as a culture apart, and a site where archaic forms of Hinduism, effaced from India by colonialism could be studied.⁷ Or the syncretism of Buddhism and Hinduism. They were the first urban population to receive serious anthropological attention, but less as urbanites than, as possible residents-of-Shangri-la: after all, no one really knows its locale. The Kathmandu Valley (Nepal mandala) with its Newer temples and *bāhāls* was as good a candidate as any. The study of Newars has encompassed all three images: a timeless culture, a syncretic one, a mystical one. Certainly there are exceptions, but I have never met a Newar who recognized more than a sliver of his or her social world in the anthropological literature.⁸

7 For a recant statement of this kind see Levy (1990).

8 While we no longer expect (or aspire to) single studies that represent *the* culture or *the* society of the X, we should worry about a collective body of scholarship that renders many lives implausible. The point is not to attack any particular study but to learn by examining the whole against this standard, about the conditioning influences on our scholarship.

“Anthropological Nepal” emerged, then, in keeping with Risley’s remark, as a place of deviations and unique variants (cf. Fisher 1985). Foreign researchers, working in the long shadow of Indian ethnography, sought to produce a map of tribes and castes. The available body of regional writing in recognizable anthropological form was Indian ethnography. Conjoined to it were theoretical texts imported via the supra-regional routes of metropolitan theory: the travelling theorists applicable anywhere, whether structural-functionalists, cultural materialists, or later, symbolic theorists. Since that pioneering work foreign anthropology in Nepal has taken on the anthropological problems of the day, but the “eyes of science” have never quite stopped conceiving of Nepali history as shallow and of the many ethnic groups of Nepal as living fairly distinct existences, little integrated into the nation-state.

What are the effects of these images today? The interface image invites thinking about Nepal mainly in reference to other places and, when conjoined with the fossil image rendered plausible a very static picture with hill tribes in their hills, mountain people in their mountains ... This picture has been overwritten by one that pays a good deal of attention to migration, and to the impact of Western development ideologies in Nepal. Yet this work still largely proceeds without connecting contemporary Nepal to its *national* political past. The force of the story that history commenced in Nepal in 1951 has been formidable. I don’t know if any anthropologist really believes it anymore, or experiences the country as a medieval kingdom thrust into the 20th century. I like to think not. But whatever the case, the trope continues to exert its effects: the lack of a colonial history is easily, unreflectively equated with lack of a history of national cultural politics.

I will give just one example: the nearly complete lack of attention to Nepali writings on culture and politics, both fictional and non-fictional. It is hard to imagine a study of Bengali politics that would fail to take note of Bengali writers. But it is hard to think of a study of Nepali politics that notices that there are Nepali writers. Studies of Hindi language movements in North India need to take account of figures like Harishchandra, but studies of language politics in Nepal do not mention the writings of Parasmani Pradhan, Surya Bikram Gyawali or Balkrishna Sama,⁹ let alone Motiram Bhatta who listened to Harishchandra in Banaras and look up the cause of the Nepali language. These kinds of links with India are invisible, written over by theoretical links. We will

9 See, for example Pradhan (2028 v.s.), Gyawali (2013 v.s.), Sama (2029 v.s.).

compare kinship patterns among hill Brahmins with those of North India, but we fail to notice the actual journey of a hill Brahmin like Motiram or Dharanidhara Koirala who together rediscovered for Nepali nationalists one of their foundational figures the poet Bhanubhakta (Koirala 2033 v.s.). Recent studies of the history of Bengali cultural politics are replete with references to Bankimchandra Chatterjee, so much so that it has become a joke in the halls of South Asian Studies departments. But no study of Nepali cultural politics notices that Bankimchandra was being translated into Nepali by Parasmani Pradhan in 1916 (Pradhan 2028 v.s.: 3-9). What is the difference? Nepali literary critics have been writing about these figures for as many years as anthropologists have been working in Nepal. People like Harishchandra were working within a colonial context, and their writings and activism form part of the history that leads to post-colonial India. Nepali writers were working against what was an equally oppressive but noncolonial Rana government. Their forging of a genealogy for the Nepali nation was deeply influenced by colonial India – both encounters there, and the availability of colonized India as a site *against which* to imagine Nepal as a place apart, unique, independent and brave.

Many core elements of the panchayat government's version of the Nepali nation come from these early 20th century writings. The panchayat system was in place during the period when most of the anthropology of Nepal has been produced (1962-1990). Serious study of its ideology was not politically possible during those years, or at least not publication of such research. Yet we rather easily assumed it to be something *foreign to the soil*, while its own rhetoric was all about being *suited to the soil*, an intrinsically Nepali form of governance (e.g., K. Pradhan 2024 v.s., Mohsin & Rana 1966). I think we did not recognize the Nepaliness it claimed just because we were largely unaware of its sources. We have been inclined to see the rhetoric of progress and development (*vikās*), a dominant feature of the landscape for the last thirty years, as an import with clearly Western origins, and have failed to notice the long history that would show us late 19th and early 20th century Nepali writings on the need for progress and upliftment of the Gorkhali *jāti*. Like anthropologists, these Nepali writers worked in the shadow of India, finding inspiration and a measure against which to judge the condition of Nepal there. But their referents were very different ones than ours have been and we have failed to notice that they existed at all.

Since the panchayat system was overthrown in 1990 anthropologists have quickly and understandably turned their attention to ethnic politics.

The public sphere debates would be too striking to ignore even if this were not a subject of current interest in the discipline. Thus far, however, with a very few exceptions, I see no evidence that the kind of history hinted at above is being taken into account. The arguments I hear when I broach the subject take several forms. The first is that the majority of the Nepali population even today is illiterate and so the writing of a few urban elites a long time ago can have had little impact on the way most people think about Nepali identity. The assumption that Nepali writers have all been urban elites is incorrect, but even if they were, this response is striking. E.P. Thompson did not imagine that factory workers in England were all sitting around reading Blake or Cobbett or Paine, but he finds their writings to be important to understanding the making of the English working class and a particular version of Englishness. We have a hard time imagining the pertinence of such writings I think, because we have not quite conceived of the residents of Anthropological Nepal as being fully residents of political Nepal, and because there was not room in Anthropological Nepal for a figure like Parasmani Pradhan, nor even for a Thakali writer like Bhupi Sherchan or a Tamang one like Parijat.¹⁰ No place on the map.

The second argument is that many of the hill and mountain peoples of Nepal have felt themselves to be unconnected to the *sarkār* (the government). It has been a distant presence in some cases, deeply intrusive in others, but in either case a foreign presence demanding taxes, proclaiming improvements that fail to materialize and so on. My point is not that everyone has felt equally incorporated into the nation-state, nor that state rhetoric about citizenship was simply absorbed and had uniform effects. Precisely the opposite is the case. My point is that how the nation-state has mattered and what the long years of panchayat era indoctrination have wrought will vary enormously and have a thousand histories. So too for the Rana era that preceded it. But when we look at these questions only from the perspective of the local, and do so in ignorance of the history of national political culture, we can paint only half the picture.

I also think it likely that we have underestimated the influences of state rhetoric about the nation. Post-1990 debates have not sprung from

10 Bhupi Sherchan and Parijat are two of the most famous writers of Nepal both of whom were members of Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups widely studied by anthropologists. Both were extremely acute observers and critics of Nepali society.

nowhere. Many ethnic magazines have begun publication since 1990 and many *janajāti* political organizations have been formed. In those magazines one finds many different lines of argument about what should constitute national culture, about the core components of Nepali identity and about the history of the state. I have been struck by the fact that, while much of this writing is in strong opposition to what is perceived as a Bahun/Chhetri/Newar cultural and political hegemony, it is mainly about redefining a more inclusive Nepali identity and not, for example, a rhetoric of separatism. Where, we have to ask, has such a strong sense of Nepali identity emerged from, if people felt so disconnected from the nation-state that, as the old story goes, they called the Kathmandu Valley 'Nepal' and thought of it as a foreign land?

Anthropological writing has functioned like a palimpsest, erasing the Nepali writing that preceded it, and has told a very different story. It has also ignored the writing that occurred alongside it, from panchayat tracts to the *āñcalik* fiction¹¹ whose project it has been to depict the experience of daily life in a social realist style. These writings together have important things to teach us about Nepali political culture including how those we have traditionally studied have been imagined and understood by those who governed, set social policy and formulated strategies of national integration. I do not suggest that we should stop all other work and only read, but that we should also read. It should be as surprising not to know the work of Balkrishna Sama as for an anthropologist who works in France not to know Proust.

We easily, and naturally, or so it seems to us, will take Foucault or Bakhtin to the furthest corners of Nepal, and expect that those writings will be explanatory of social processes we observe there. The very particular histories of their texts are left behind and in that usage they are implied to transcend them. I think it possible to bring such texts to bear on histories and social practices their authors did not conceive of and I don't suggest we leave them all at home and go, textually speaking, native. But I do suggest that it is peculiar to take their relevance to be self-evident

11 *Āñcalik* (regional writing) is a term used to describe a particular genre of fiction that is social realist in style, but beyond this is work distinguished by being undetachable from the locale in which it is set. Thus *āñcaliktā* is never about a generic village, but steeped in the history and culture or particular places even as the stories are real-time depictions of the trials and tribulations of individuals emergent from wider social inequalities. There are many analogies between *āñcalik* fiction and ethnography that merit investigation.

while maintaining that a Kathmandu-based writer can teach us nothing, from a much more proximate locale – not just geographically, but culturally – because he or she is a product of a different historical experience than that of a hill farmer. Clifford (1988) has remarked that despite much talk about the democratization of our practice, about *engaging* with local scholarship, and producing *dialogic* texts, it remains the case that our theoretical pantheon functions as another register, ultimately subsuming and explaining all the other voices. Said (1989) has taken us to task in a stronger voice, claiming that we merely absorb the literary and academic products of the places we study – when we attend to them at all – as so much more native exegesis for analysis. Asad (1986) has pointed out the inequality of “strong” and “weak” languages in academia, one measure being which is more frequently translated into the other. Nepali writing has perhaps been ignored because it will mean doing the work to be able to read it, but also because it does not necessarily come dressed in familiar forms and its referents are not always those of metropolitan theory. This does not mean that it should be treated as so many more native texts, but rather as another scholarly tradition with which it is our minimal responsibility to become conversant. Only after that could we argue about its value, one way or the other, for understanding the diverse places and peoples of Nepal that we variously study.

Nepal has been treated as something of a backwater in South Asian studies, and I may have made a too-convincing case for why that is. To reiterate though: When thought about at all it seems to be thought of as sort of a quaint place, somewhat backward, and puzzling; almost but-not-quite India. Nepal is manifestly not India, as any Nepali or any anthropologist who works there will quickly tell you. But one of the important ways it is not – a political culture that has insisted on its differences and celebrated its non-colonized history with profound effects for national policy in many domains – has been left out of the picture we present to other South Asianists. Nepal’s non-colonized history is precisely what connects it to South Asia. A non-colonial nationalism with deep roots in colonial India, a current political relationship with India that has its roots in Nepal’s relationship with British India, a history of labor migration that is similarly rooted in the political-economy of British India. And a vision of the nation premised on the Nepali language, the monarchy and Hinduism as its defining features, a vision forged in contradistinction to colonized India. That vision of the nation was never anyone’s and it is now vocally contested from many quarters, but we

cannot understand the contestation until we include in our study the political history that produced this vision in the first place.

I have suggested that to do so we would need to engage in a certain kind of post-colonial scholarship. It would not be a particularly familiar kind, for it would be, at least in the beginning, devotedly local, learning about what is written beneath the palimpsest of our own representations of Nepal. I am not alone in recognizing deficiencies in the anthropological representation of Nepal, nor its peripheral place in South Asian studies. But the bulk of revisionary interest seems to be focused on making Nepali examples speak to the concerns of metropolitan theory. I would not be surprised, for example, to find the Indo-Tibetan interface image rewritten in the language of the borderland. While this might be a worthwhile conceptual advance it does not touch the issue of the relation between 'Nepal' in quotes, an anthropological representation, and Nepal, a nation-state and its history. I want to question the naturalness by which Gloria Anzaldúa might be brought to bear to explicate the state of things in Nepal, but a writer like Balkrishna Sama, whose essays, poems, and plays, written within and for a Nepali context, show constant concern with the same issues, would be nowhere in sight. This strikes me as neither a post-colonialist nor a non-imperial anthropology, only an ill-informed one.

Looking at the question from the point of view of South Asian studies, neither the kind of depictions of Nepal that are easily available, nor the common lag between new research and the transmission of new images beyond specialists on a place go all of the way to explaining its peripheral status. The influence of Subaltern Studies on South Asian Studies and efforts from many directions to develop post-colonial understandings of the subcontinent have rewritten the map in many ways. And yet, despite the profession of interest in margins, marginalization, subalterns, and so on, one sees relatively little attention to some peripheries, some subalterns – Nepal and Nepalis among them. At the grossest level I would say that just because it was never a colonial place it does not have the caché of a post-colonial one. This of course ignores the deep effects of colonialism across the border for Nepal, and similarly the effects of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan's post-colonial histories. When one considers the subcontinent as a whole, all of Nepal might emerge as a nation of subalterns, but not being in Bengal, Bihar or UP there is little notice. The continuation of colonial borders in defining the parameters of post-colonial rethinking becomes quite striking. Here again, I wonder about the degree of interest in the social history of places versus the

amenability of places to being crafted into examples of issues that interest us and will play, not in Peoria, but in Cambridge or *Critical Inquiry*.

My vision of what a post-colonial anthropology of non-colonized Nepal might look like quite an unrealistic one. Its very unlikelihood also calls into question for me the legitimacy of the many calls for a post-colonial, non-imperial anthropology. When I have made what to my mind is a rather mild observation to others who work in Nepal – that we ought to be conversant with the literature and scholarship of the country we study that is written in the national language – I have met with a hostility that surprised me more than any response to an ethnographic query in Nepal ever did: I want to have a family and be able to go to the beach once in a while, and variants on this theme. And more bluntly: I get no credit here for reading anything in Nepali. It has been in response to this observation that I have been instructed on the irrelevancy of Nepali writers to the rural areas where many anthropologists work, and have heard the argument about literacy that I mentioned earlier. Encapsulated in these responses I think one sees the effects of the convergence of the anthropological images of Nepal that I have recounted and the discipline of anthropology as a career, with its institutional structures and disciplinary regimes.

True fluency and conversance with Nepali scholarship is imagined as a Himal that, if climbed, would preclude any other life. On this point, I can only say that there is one way in which we might consider emulating the old Orientalists. But beyond this lurks the hegemony of citation and the need to position talk about Nepal in familiar theoretical idioms: I get no credit here for reading Nepali. And finally, I think, one sees at work the naturalization of the mobility of metropolitan theory, an incarceration of “native thought,” and the embeddedness of an idea of certain Nepalis as more “genuine” and representative than others.

The kind of work on Nepali cultural politics that I have used as my example would not be more familiar, either to other South Asianists or to anthropologists who work in other places altogether, than the not-quite-India version of Nepal. Indeed it would be considerably less familiar. Without the summarizing depictions of other places that Appadurai (1988a, 1988b) critiqued, or the familiar body of references that help us to read a “case study” as an example of a particular problem or process, it would require far more work on our part both to produce our own work and to read that of others. I think disciplinary structures are particularly unlikely to countenance – or count – such defamiliarizing work at this moment. But I also think that it would be one face of a

post-colonial anthropology. And without at least concern for these issues, I have to ask a question raised by Richard Fardon (1990). He posed it in a critique of Stephen Tylor's argument for evocation in the interest of greater self-understanding as the project of anthropology. It was a devastatingly simple question: "Why involve others at all"? It is a question that has never left my mind and I ask it more broadly here.

I have come to think about these issues in response to a set of questions posed to me over recent months by Nepali academics, all of them from other disciplines. The first was asked by one Nepali academic of another. He said, "with all the anthropologists who have been running around in Nepal for so many years, why is Nepal not more prominent in social theory? Do we just have a second-rate bunch of scholars?" The person to whom the question was initially posed happily (for me) answered the second part of the question, saying that no, our lot is neither better nor worse than anyone else's. But he passed it on to me for a fuller explanation.

The second was less a question than a set of accusations: Anthropological work in Nepal is purely extractive, a means to buy one's way into the academy in the West. It is doubly exploitative when intrusively personal, and worse yet when shallow and ill-informed. Moreover, it seems to have little relevancy and make little effort to show that it does, to those grappling with social problems.

The third question was posed after hearing a set of papers on Nepal at a conference. Do anthropologists, she asked, every go beyond stating the evident?¹²

What I have said here is but the bare beginnings of an answer to these challenges. I bring them up to emphasize that others are also asking why they have been involved. I see no particularly good answers on the horizon unless we achieve a shift of priorities that might enable more conversation with, and less extraction from those in the places we study, post-colonial and non-colonized alike. To do so will take much more than entering into debates about post-coloniality or a non-imperial

12 One part of my response was to say that it can be taken as a measure of the success of an ethnographic depiction that a person native to the place would find it self-evident, both because it suggests we got it right, and because much ethnography (though not all) attempts to make explicit what is tacit in the belief that what is taken for granted is most deeply cultural. While this does not cover every kind of anthropology, it does point out the extent to which depictions of this kind are directed at the world of anthropology and social theory.

anthropology and may need to begin at home, in the ways we conceive of adequate graduate training, and the ways we define what counts as good scholarship.

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