

SYSTEMATIC LOSS OF DOCUMENTS, “HISTORY-MAKING” PROCESSES AND A “NATIVE” RESEARCHER: CHALLENGES OF DOING RESEARCH IN ONE’S OWN HOMETOWN

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Introduction

In this article I detail how I was serendipitously drawn towards the topic of my PhD research (Parajuli 2009). I will explain how, during the preliminary stage of my field research, I encountered unforeseen problems—particularly in unearthing documentary artifacts that were crucial to my research—and subsequent issues with memories and selective narration of the past events, and the actors’ roles in those events, as well as my positionality. I’ll argue that the nature of the regime (autocratic) was largely responsible for the loss of personal historical documents. Such a loss, I’ll argue, also allowed “smart” actors ample rooms to maneuver in the “history-making process” by exaggerating or downplaying their roles, depending on the events that they thought were moments of pride or shame.

In October 2000, like any other year, I spent the Dashain holidays at my parents’ house in Pokhara, the home where I was born and grew up in. Having nothing particular to do, one day I was exploring some old books kept in a stack to see if I could find something interesting to read. Flipping through the pages of a tattered book, an oval shaped seal caught my attention. It read: “Aadarsha Pustakalaya, established 2007 [i.e., 1951], Pokhara.” Perhaps I had heard a passing mention of this *pustakālaya* (library) before, but I had never given it a serious thought. This time, somehow the seal made me think. I asked myself, “A library in 1951?” Growing up in Pokhara during the 1980s, I never had access to a library. At that time neither my school nor Pokhara town had a public library to speak of.¹

¹ The information department of the government had a *vācanālaya* (reading room) at Tersapatti, Pokhara where some weeklies and government publications were available.

Curious as I was, I asked my father about the library. He told me that it was established after the Rana regime (1846–1951) was ended in 1951 and that he had himself managed the library for some years in the late 1950s. Besides, he informed, Pokhara also had other libraries—local libraries as well as an Indian and a British library²—in the past. The fact that my father’s generation had access to public libraries, whereas my generation did not struck me as odd. I also learned that the Panchayat regime (1960–1990) shutdown not only the Aadarsha Library but also a few other libraries in Pokhara. I wondered why a regime that touted “education for development” as a mantra would want to deprive its citizens from having access to public libraries. I asked myself if this amounted to a systematic strategy to stop my generation of Pokhara residents from using public libraries.

My interest in the libraries then increased, and I began to look for materials on public libraries throughout Nepal. I read similar stories in newspaper reports, articles and memoirs and soon learned that the Panchayat state machinery, or its agents were to be blamed for the demise of many public libraries across the country. Elsewhere I have reviewed such published materials which showed a distinct pattern: the sporadic efforts to establish libraries during the late Rana period gained momentum and saw a surge during the democratic decade (1951–1960). But after the introduction of the Panchayat system in 1960, the public libraries declined across the country (R. Parajuli 2006; Parajuli 2019).³ Older libraries died out whereas setting up a new library not only became difficult, but people were also discouraged to do so in the during the Panchayat era. Intrigued, I decided to explore the history of public libraries of Nepal in my dissertation—their genesis, growth and decline—and to find out the reasons for such an uneven growth process during the twentieth century. Because of my concern for human agency in historical process I wanted to follow the trajectories of the actors, i.e., founders, promoters, managers, etc. of the libraries as much as I wanted to look at the institutions themselves. I was interested in the whole gamut of issues related to public libraries: from their organizational structures to their objectives and visions; from their collections of books and other materials to knowing who were accessing those collections; from finding out how the

² Established and run by the Indian and British embassies, respectively.

³ The first of my two articles cited here was published under my nickname Ramesh Parajuli.

libraries were organizing their outreach and other activities to knowing how their users were taking advantage of such opportunities.

I began my inquiries from my hometown. I had aimed to visit three or four more places—in the eastern and western parts of Nepal—after completing my research in Pokhara. But, as I commenced my research in Pokhara, I encountered unforeseen problems basically in the form of my inability to unearth necessary documentary evidence (e.g., collection inventories, records of books issued to users, other log books, membership records, receipts for book purchases and membership fees, proceedings of meetings of library managers, etc.) needed for my research on libraries. These documents were crucial to understand the functioning of the libraries and other related issues. Challenges in gathering materials (documents as well as interviews) aside, I increasingly came to realize something else too: the public libraries could not be seen as an isolated phenomenon. They were intrinsically related to other social formations that were evolving in the late Rana era and they all followed largely similar growth patterns.

It became abundantly clear to me that these social formations were deeply enmeshed, and in fact complemented each other. When I followed the trajectories of the founders, promoters or managers of these libraries, I realized that their involvement was not limited to libraries only. Rather they were equally involved in other social formations of the period such as political parties, neighborhood reform committees, schools, theaters, media institutions, etc. Libraries, in many instances, were just a part of their overall social activism. It also turned out that the libraries were founded and used for various purposes—from expanding the base of newly formed political parties to complementing educational efforts. Had I considered the libraries merely as part of the education system, which they no doubt were, and proceeded with my research, I would have entirely missed the “public sphere role” that they equally performed. I also would have missed their connections with political activism, national politics, and, to a certain degree, with international political developments. This important realization, I was convinced, demanded a different, more holistic approach (cf. Burawoy 1991b), and it ultimately led me to expand the scope of the research I was planning to do for my dissertation. I decided to look at the evolution of these various social formations (of which libraries were just one kind) against the backdrop of wider political developments of the period through the theoretical lens of civil society (see Parajuli 2009 for details). I also decided to concentrate my

research in the Pokhara region while locating developments there within the context of changes taking place in the entire country.

The aim of the research thus changed—to explore how civil society evolved in Nepal, and particularly in Pokhara, and how over time its members acted, reacted, and/or interacted with the changing nature of the state. Apart from looking at the constituents of the civil society, I also followed the trajectories of the individual actors involved in them. The actors became all the more important in my study, as many of the institutions which I was interested in died out prematurely without leaving many traces, documentary or otherwise, largely due to state interventions.

My putting actors at the core of my analysis, and my opting for biographical (life history) interviews with them, however, was done not just to get insights into what happened at particular periods in history, or to get information which otherwise would have been difficult to obtain for various reasons (see below), but also because I subscribed largely to an agent- or actor-centric methodological approach (cf. Rosenthal 1993). Norman Long, in what he calls the “actor-oriented approach,” has put it succinctly: any sociological or historical study of change should be concerned with “the ways in which different social actors manage and interpret new elements in their life-worlds;” analyze “how particular groups or individuals attempt to create space for themselves in order to carry out their own ‘projects’ that may run parallel to, or perhaps challenge, government programmes” as well as policies/ideologies, “or the interest of other intervening parties.” Such a study should also attempt to “show how these organisational, strategic and interpretive processes can influence [and themselves be influenced by] the broader context of power and social action” (Long 1992a: 33–34, see also Long 1992b). I held the view that the actors are both “knowledgeable” and “capable,” and there is room to maneuver for them, however feeble that may be. Having said that, it would perhaps be fitting for me to mention here that the same actors who continuously negotiate with the system also constantly position and reposition themselves in trying to outmaneuver the researcher, who supposedly is conducting research on them. I will come back to this point later.

As the research problem I wanted to investigate was of historical nature, the methods that I could choose were already limited. I picked up archival research and biographical interviews as two basic research methods which, like any other research technique, have their own advantages, biases,

and limitations (see Burawoy 1991a). Books and articles on qualitative research methods have discussed in length about life hi/stories⁴ biographies, memories or interview techniques, and the problems associated with them (see, for instance, Bertaux 1981; Fisher 1997; Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Silverman 2004; Seale *et al.* 2004; Silverman 2006). Nonetheless, I'll share the observations as well as methodological challenges and dilemmas that I faced while conducting field research, for I believe they had bearings on my research. This will also explicate the limitations of my research.

The rest of the article is organized as follows: I'll first detail the challenges that I faced in unearthing documentary evidence related to my research and try to make sense of the unavailability of these documents. I'll then discuss the challenges of conducting life historical interviews with aged but smart actors and the consequences of loss of documents. In the third section I'll discuss my positionality and the benefits as well as pitfalls of being a "native" researcher.

The Systematic Loss of Documents

In Kathmandu I visited two libraries, namely, the Tribhuvan University Central Library and the National Library, whereas in Pokhara I visited the Western Regional (Prithvi Narayan Campus) Library and Pokhara Public Library in search of documents, newspapers, books, articles, etc. related to my research. I could not find much which, in a way, was not surprising. Since the media sector was incipient, or non-existent (in the case of Pokhara till 1960), many local events went unrecorded. And having no public depository (which is still the case)—both national and local—also resulted in poor documentation, even of published materials. Likewise, state interventions on locally established libraries led to their demise (see Parajuli 2019 for details).

In 1960, a four-page weekly newspaper *Himdūt* got started in Pokhara, making it the first paper of the town.⁵ But within a few months of its publication, absolute monarchic rule displaced multi-party democracy, which imposed obstructions in running the newspaper. On top of that, its

⁴ Life story, according to Rosenthal, is a "narrated personal life as related to another in conversation or as written down in the present day" and life history is "the experiences that a person has lived through" (Rosenthal 2002: 228, fn. 5).

⁵ Daily *Nirṇaya* was the first daily to be published from Pokhara. But only a few issues of it were published from Pokhara, and later it was published from Bhairahawa, a town in central south Nepal.

young editor, Jagannath Sigdel, who also was the chief architect behind the paper, died soon after (K. Parajuli 2002, 2008). The newspaper continued to be published by other members of the group who kept it running for the next 15 years (till c. 1977). The publication, however, was not very regular. Apart from Rishi Koirala, three other major figures associated with the paper from its beginning were/are still alive. Yet none of them had even a partial collection of the paper, or archives of their personal contributions.⁶ It is a pity that, apart from some issues collected in one of the libraries in the Kathmandu Valley, Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya (MPP), old issues of this newspaper now do not exist as far as I know.⁷ Later on a few other newspapers also got started in Pokhara, publishing again irregularly (see K. Parajuli 2006, 2008; see also Upadhyaya 2038 v.s.; Khanal 2056 v.s.), but the problem with their archive was no different.

More than from the libraries I was expecting my primary research materials to come from individual actors' records and documents. I, therefore, sought personal communications, diaries, (political) party membership cards, and other related materials, as well as inventories, proceedings, minutes/decision books, etc. of different social formations of that period. These materials, I thought, would provide me with enough information about the numerous events and incidents that occurred and would thereby enable me to analyze the events, contexts, as well as the discourses. Apart from analyzing the texts, the materials were also conceived as "memory triggers" while interviewing the actors. To my dismay, I was not able to get as many documents/materials as I had anticipated before commencing the field research—neither in "national" libraries situated in Kathmandu, nor in personal collections.

⁶ My father Keshav Raj Parajuli is one of the three (the other two being Chitrangad Sigdel and Tej Nath Ghimire) and has been associated with the press or the publication sector from the early days in Pokhara. Neither my father nor the other two have collections of their old writings published in *Himdūt* or otherwise. It is not that they did not want to save these materials. They blame the situation partly on neglect from their side, partly on the economic health of their households, and partly on the political system for not being able to keep the records. Interviews with Parajuli, Sigdel and Ghimire, various dates, 2005 and 2006.

⁷ The MPP located in Patan has some issues of the paper in its collection but I could not read them at the time since the library was not allowing researchers to access newspapers in its collection which had not yet been microfilmed.

Low literacy rates as well as having no “culture” of keeping diaries partially accounts for the unavailability of personal records.⁸ But that is not all. Even though I got access to a few old documents in personal records (kept in old tin boxes; some tattered), it turned out that, because of the repressive nature of the Panchayat regime, there was a systematic loss of documents.⁹ Not only did the actors (mostly the political actors) knowingly not keep many “important” records, they even destroyed such records, which they previously held, and otherwise would perhaps have kept. For instance, when I asked Lila Bhakta Acharya—who was the chairperson of the Kaski district committee of Nepali Congress in 1960—if he had kept any old documents related to party/activities, he replied, “*Bābu, jyānai jogāuna gāro thiyo, kāgaj-patrako ke kurā bho ra?*” (Son, it was difficult to save one’s life; hence, who could think of saving the documents?)¹⁰ Tanka Man Napit, who was on the run after the political change of 1960, said, “I used to collect everything, but when I had to flee, my family got scared and destroyed a lot of what I had collected.”¹¹

Likewise, Gehendreshwor Koirala, a lecturer at the Prithvi Narayan Campus in Pokhara who also was active in leftist politics, shared a similar story. During the “people’s movement” of 1990 he was involved in oppositional politics. Sensing imminent arrest, he gathered all the documents that might be troublesome if they reached the hands of the “security forces,” wrapped them in a plastic bag, and buried them in a nearby field. As anticipated, he was arrested, and subsequently jailed. When he was released after the reinstatement of multi-party democracy, he tried to unearth the documents, but to no avail. He said, “I dug the whole area;

⁸ It may well be the case that, for different reasons, some of my interviewees did not want to share their “personal records” with me. My being “local” could also have worked against me, here. A “regular” researcher perhaps would have been able to enter the “private domain” of the interviewees (see below). For an account of the psychology of keeping a diary, see Wiener and Rosenwald (1993).

⁹ During the Rana period (1846–1951) there was no popular print or radio, or libraries to speak of. When the Rana regime was ended in 1951, the rate of literacy was quite low (around 2%). So, no historical depth in terms of research archives of such personal materials existed prior to 1950 as well. This also partly explains the lack of “document-culture.”

¹⁰ Interview with Lila Bhakta Acharya, January 2006.

¹¹ Interview with Tanka Man Napit, September 2005.

I still wonder how the documents could vanish?”¹² Others, too, responded in a similar vein. Some claimed that documents were destroyed so that the security forces could not get hold of evidence. A few, like Napit, blamed their family members/spouses. A few others cited economic conditions or lack of enough space, whereas a few said, “Who had thought that those old papers would be of value today?” Likewise, a few also blamed “the others” for spying, collaborating with the state agents and handing in the documents and in turn reaping the benefits.

My informants’ anxieties became much more relatable one morning in April 2006 when six or seven policemen came knocking at my family’s house in Pokhara, demanding to search it. I had just gotten up and was sipping my morning tea. When I asked the reason for their visit, they replied that they wanted to search the house. The pretext behind the raid was the movement against the then King Gyanendra Shah’s 2005 takeover, which was at its peak then. All across the country, including in Pokhara and in my neighborhood, people were coming out on the streets every day in unprecedented numbers to participate in the movement. My parents and I were also involved. The raid was a futile attempt on the part of the government to thwart the agitations and the movement. When I did not allow them to enter without a search warrant, they went out to report to their officer (who was staying outside with another group, my neighbors told me later), who in turn talked to his superiors over the walkie-talkie. They came back again and pressed me, but I did not relent. In the end, they returned empty handed, but noted down my name, my father’s name, house number, etc. More than a week later (on April 24), the king finally yielded, paving the way for agitating parties to run the country.

This, however, was not the first time that our house in Pokhara had been raided. In the past too, the “security forces” had invaded our house a number of times as my father was involved in oppositional politics. I do not recall all of them, but there are several such incidents which I remember well, for I personally had to deal with the invaders. Back in 1990, during the “first people’s movement,” our house in Pokhara was raided twice. My father was the district coordinator of the “united movement organizing committee,” and was underground. We also had a small letter press then, where pamphlets and leaflets related to the movement were printed. One day, two vans-full of policemen came to search our house/press. But since we were tipped off, we

¹² Interview with Gehendreshwor Koirala, November 2005.

managed to bury the materials related to the movement in a nearby field. Even though they could not get hold of anything related to the ongoing movement, they took away other printed materials related to the oppositional groups.¹³ A couple of days later, in the evening time, another group of policemen came to our house¹⁴ and searched all over again, but failed to unearth anything significant. This time we were saved largely because the electricity went off and it was dark inside the press.

Similarly, in 2002 the government had imposed a state of emergency in the wake of violent conflict with the Maoists. One day in November, in the wee hours (around 3:30 am), I heard knocks at the door of our flat in Lalitpur, which I was sharing with my friend Shekhar. Half awake, when I opened the door, seven or eight armed men in combat outfits (some also had covered their faces with bandannas) stormed inside. (Later in the morning I was told that the army was cordoning off the whole area.) Some of them positioned themselves in different corners, a couple of them started grilling us, whereas a few others began searching our rooms and book shelves. They even made me open my computer, and checked a few CDs. Even though I had a few books on the Maoist movement and also a folder containing Maoist related files in the computer, they were a bit reckless and did not find any Maoist related materials. I was “lucky” once again. Nevertheless, they took away a number of Nepali books and other printed materials, for they contained some key phrases like “the dictator,” “autocratic Panchayat system,” “Dalit, *Janajāti* movement,” etc. When I tried to explain that those books/materials had nothing to do with the Maoists, they told me to shut up and threatened arrest.

Indeed, during the state of emergency, a lot of people destroyed newspapers, magazines, journals, or books related to the Maoists or “leftist” politics. A few researcher friends had shifted all their communist party-related

¹³ I remember that they took, among others, copies of *Vikalpa*, a publication of the Nepal Student Union, the student front of the then banned party Nepali Congress, and *Tij* song books published by ANNFSU, the student wing of the banned Communist Party.

¹⁴ This group (or at least the police Inspector) came directly from the royal palace or Ratna Mandir where at that time the then King Birendra and his wife were residing temporarily, as part of their yearly tours to different “development regions.” It was interesting to see the Inspector scolding a Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) Khand (senior in rank than Inspector) in front of all for not doing his duty properly because it was Khand who had led the previous attempted raid.

materials to their offices, not just because they wanted to stave off arrest, but largely because of the safety of the materials. They knew that they will never get their collections back should the “security forces” get hold of them, as had happened to me and to many others.¹⁵ This “problem,” of course, is largely related to political formations, but then “political” was inseparable from “social” and, as I show in my dissertation, political parties were the mainstay of many social activities, especially during the 1950s. Furthermore, it is the state agents who decide what is political or subversive content and what is not. These examples to an extent explain the reasons for the lack of personal records and historical documentary materials, dynamics that continued to pose threats even in the 1990s and 2000s. And, in the case of the unavailability of personal or institutional documents or archives of published materials, the importance of biographical interviews is further increased. But this very fact also gives the “smart” actors more room to maneuver in what we can call “history-making/-writing” processes, a point I now turn to.

Memories, Auto/Biographies and the “History-making” Processes

In my research I have used autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, and biographical (or life history) interviews (that I conducted with 86 social actors lasting from half an hour to several hours). These, along with testimonio, autoethnography, and oral history, have been in use in the social sciences—from anthropology to sociology to history to behavioral sciences—since long and some of these methods are more favored by one discipline than by others.¹⁶ Though different in their approaches and concerns, one common thing in these methods is that they all are related to memories of the past events. Some people can remember past events better than others, but memory also fades in the later stages of life.

Biographical research is said to offer maximum opportunity for people to speak for themselves, and its major objective is to encompass the total life of an individual (Bertaux and Kohli 1984). However, it is also understood that it is not feasible and possible (and also not desirable) to account every

¹⁵ This digression to a personal story is perhaps justified for it shows that the threat of loss of political documents was real not only during the Panchayat regime but also after it had been ended in 1990. This threat is still alive particularly when regimes turn autocratic.

¹⁶ For an account of life history studies in the social sciences, see Mandelbaum (1973: 177–206).

single event that took place in one's life. And, to quote Gabriele Rosenthal, "[t]he present perspective conditions the selection of memories, the temporal and thematic linkages of memories, and the type of representations of the remembered experiences" (Rosenthal 2004: 50). Kohli elaborates further: "[N]arratives always contain a reconstructive element. The reference to past events occurs in the context of the present situation, and under the criterion of their significance to it" (Kohli 1981: 67). So, clearly, a life history is a carefully selected and mediated text between the respondent and the researcher. Based on their assessment of the project and of the researcher, the respondents narrate their stories in the way they deem appropriate, even if the researcher wants otherwise. Occasionally one can observe memory blocks or narration gaps in their stories (e.g., on traumatic, taboo, or embarrassing cases); they shy away from certain events, or provide cover stories and justifications of their acts.¹⁷ In her studies on war memories of German soldiers, Rosenthal shows that the "experiences which can be brought in to a sequential order are more easily narrated than diffuse chaotic experiences," and "whenever a certain period of life influences the rest of that life by affecting the present and the future of the biographer then this period must somehow be balanced" (Rosenthal 1991: 40). Similar issues emerge in the case of testimonios or autobiographies.¹⁸

¹⁷ Kamala Visweswaran (1996), who also collected life histories of the women imprisoned during the Indian nationalist movement, learns about the "lies" of her informants from one another, and argues for an increased considerations of the researcher's own and others' shifting identities, interpretations and silences over time.

¹⁸ William Tierney says, "Testimonio—as well as life history, life story, autoethnography, and the like—is situated within a series of complex and ambiguous political and cultural relations." If contradictions are found, he adds, one should "try to piece together how these multiple presentations account for contested versions of reality" (Tierney 2000: 542). See also Kohli (1981: 69–72) for a discussion on the problem of "truth" in autobiography. At least two Nobel laureates—Rigoberta Menchu (1984) and Günter Grass (2006)—have been criticized for not being truthful (in the case of former) or for hiding information for too long (in the case of latter) in their respective autobiographies. Indeed, if we treat our respondents as knowledgeable and capable political actors not lacking agency then perhaps what Menchu, or for that matter what Grass did (he hid his association with Hitler's elite corps when he was a teenager), becomes discernible. It is, however, an altogether different story when the issue is not of shame but of pride or bravery; then everyone jumps in, as I show later.

Let me now turn to some of the issues that emerged from my own fieldwork—while reading a few published auto/biographies of the local actors that I consulted, and while conducting biographical interviews with them.¹⁹ Four of the influential actors in Pokhareli public life—namely, Muktinath Timisina, Min Bahadur Gurung, Rishi Keshav Parajuli, and Amrit Prasad Sherchan—have penned their autobiographies. We also have a brief biography of another important figure, Buddhist nun Dharmashila (Gubhaju 2056 v.s.[2046 v.s.]). Timisina was the first to write, and publish his biography titled *Muktināth Timisinā* (2040 v.s.), and Gurung, who was a deputy minister in the first elected government (of 1959), followed with his autobiographical book *Saṅgharṣa Ṭuṅgiyeko Chaina* (The Struggle is Not Over, 2043 v.s.). Parajuli's autobiography *Janajāgarāṅko Satya Tathya: Pokharako Euṭā Itihās* (True Facts of Janajagan: A History of Pokhara, 2057 v.s.) was published posthumously by his sons. Sherchan's autobiography was serialized after his death in a local daily *Janamat*, however, it turned out that only half of what he wrote could be published, as the second notebook (manuscript) went missing.

In his autobiography Timisina (2040 v.s.) charts his personal life, social life, contributions, achievements, losses, frustrations and so on, and he claims leadership in many local initiatives, from establishing schools to colleges, from constructing an airport to building bridges and roads, etc. He also mentions other actors in his book—some in positive, a few others in negative light. In it he accuses his arch rival Gurung of being an opportunist, for not opposing the Rana regime when it lasted but reaping the benefit after the success of the anti-Rana movement (Timisina 2040 v.s.: 11, 18). Gurung settles the score, so to say, with his autobiography, in which he cites Timisina's old ties with the Ranas (which Timisina also acknowledges) and accuses him of collaborating with them (Gurung 2043 v.s.: 37–38). Timisina had fled to India in 1950 to evade arrest. When the Nepali Congress decided to launch an armed struggle, the party gave him the responsibility of preparing for an uprising in his home turf, but he failed to show up. He makes the case for why he could not come to Pokhara then (Timisina 2040 v.s.: 27–28), but Gurung apparently does not buy the excuses. Parajuli and Sherchan though are not directly involved at throwing brickbats, yet they also stake claims (e.g., contributions and/or involvement in various local social initiatives)

¹⁹ Along with these published auto/biographies, I have also made use of other published and unpublished materials for the analysis.

which do not always fit well with the narratives of other actors published in various *smārikās*, articles and books.

Apart from these auto/biographies, or memoir pieces, there also are a few accounts of the political developments, especially of the 1950–1951 movement, published as part of books (e.g., Sharma 2033 v.s.; Pageni 2053 v.s.; Subedi 2060 v.s.; etc.). But again these accounts are criticized by some actors for not being fair, for trying to distort history, or for attempting to omit other peoples' histories. For example, Timisina in his book criticizes Balchandra Sharma for not writing the truth, and also criticizes Shrikant Adhikari for distorting the facts (Timisina 2040 v.s.: 11).²⁰ Likewise, Shri Bhadra Sharma, one of the key political figures during the formative stage²¹ (who went on to become the general secretary of Nepali Congress, but ultimately became a part of the Panchayat system, which he had fought for years), was reluctant to talk and tried to avoid me, partly because of his poor health. After repeated requests, he finally agreed to be interviewed and only did I then understand why he wanted to refrain; he held grudges against people like me (researcher/journalist) who, even after listening to the “truth,” publish “distorted” accounts. Yet, he too is criticized by his fellow comrades (of the past, such as Shrikant Adhikari or Bhojraj Subedi) for not telling the “complete truth” or for never mentioning certain incidents.²² Shrikant Adhikari, another key political figure who collaborated with the king during the Panchayat period, rebuked historians such as Balchandra Sharma (2033 v.s.), Bhaveshwar Pageni (2053 v.s.) and Raja Ram Subedi

²⁰ Referring to the initial political formation and the subsequent movement of 1950–1951 in Pokhara, Timisina writes, “In Balchandra’s ‘*Nepalko Aitihāsik Rūprekhā*’ Min Bahadur’s name is mentioned and in ‘*Rāṣṭrya Caritra Aitihāsik Mahākāvya*’ Shrikantji elevates himself and his friends from Lamjung [who worked] in Pokhara. But to do so is opportunism, and is to kill people’s *tapasyā* (sacrifices). Min Bahadurji has done nothing in Pokhara’s social and political sector before the month of Magh 2007 v.s. He was a staunch supporter (*param puḷārī*) of the autocratic Rana regime, and I don’t think he still is utterly committed (*pavitra*) to democracy” (Timisina 2040 v.s.: 11).

²¹ For an account of the formative stage of political formations in Pokhara, see L. Parajuli (2008).

²² In the preface to his book *Jayatu Saṃskṛtam Āndolan: Ek Saṃsmaṇ*, which Sharma wrote some five decades after the movement, he laments not being able to remember the names of his friends who participated in the movement, and calls on readers/friends to help him redress this lack (Sharma 2054 v.s.: vi).

(2060 v.s.) for distorting history (Adhikari 2061 v.s.).²³ When I interviewed him, Adhikari repeatedly reminded me to write the “truth” because, he said, “nobody’s history should be omitted.” Bhoj Raj Subedi also echoed similar arguments several times during my interview with him.²⁴

Many of these actors wanted “true” history to be written, so they provided me with what they think is the “truth.” Nonetheless, it is their version of truth, which does not necessarily match with other actors’ versions of truth. And they wanted their footprints in the pages of history—“nobody’s history should be distorted/omitted,” they repeated. Implicit in their message was “do not dare to omit my role/contribution/history.” Not only the actors themselves, but their children too are concerned with the “golden history,” (*sunaulo itihās*) of their parents; they claim that they want to keep the legacy intact.²⁵

The actors, according to Long (1992b), actively shape the researcher’s own fieldwork strategies—molding the contours and the outcomes of the research process itself. He argues that just as the researcher enrolls the locals in his or her research project, the locals enroll the researcher in their projects. Am I not being roped in their own history-writing project?²⁶ I asked myself because their “truth” startled me, literally. I scratched my head as the dates they told me varied not in days, or months but in years, sometimes even decades.²⁷ As my respondents mostly were elderly people, it perhaps was not unusual for them to not remember the dates or details. Memory fades with

²³ I had a chance to look at the books *Paścim Nepal mā Prajātāntrik Āndolan* written by Bhaveshwar Pangenī (2053 v.s.), and *Kaski Rājyako Itihās* by Raja Ram Subedi (2060 v.s.) in Adhikari’s possession, in which he had marked “false” or “utterly false” (*jhūṭ*) in red ink on several paragraphs that dealt with political developments around the Pokhara region.

²⁴ During the interview Subedi also criticized his fellow comrades Tara Nath Ranabhat, Mitra Lal Sapkota and Shri Bhadra Sharma either for making tall claims or for not telling the complete story.

²⁵ As told when I visited them during my field research by the new managers of the now revived public libraries. These revived libraries were not in a very good shape when I visited them.

²⁶ Sudhir Venkatesh (2008), during his research on a crack-selling gang, Black King, in Chicago shows how he too was “appropriated” by his informants in many ways.

²⁷ Dates also matter much to my research because the same deed done during the time of a democratic regime or during the time of an autocratic regime connotes very different meanings.

age. But some actors, knowing/thinking that the documents do not exist to prove them otherwise, I believe, exaggerated their involvements in the social formations, for they too want a bigger footprint in this “history-making/writing” processes—perhaps larger than their “fair” share.²⁸

Biographical research method argues for open-ended, unmoderated/uninterrupted life stories. In my case, even though I let the actors speak largely freely, I understand that I already had set the terms, so to say. I used to tell them that since I had found that they were involved in Pokhareli public life, I would like to learn more about them, their roles and about the society they grew up in. I always asked them to begin from their childhood days, and tell me about their family background, their access to education, etc. During the interviews, I occasionally sought clarifications, tried to correct them when I observed inconsistencies, or factual mistakes that I knew of, despite the biographical method suggesting otherwise (Rosenthal 2004).²⁹ However, I did not challenge the veracity of their stories not because I was not concerned about them being accurate but because I considered it inappropriate to challenge a person who, despite poor health or busyness, was doing a favor to me by agreeing to spend hours and share information or thoughts that were crucial to my research.

On one occasion I tried a different modality: unlike some other institutions that figure in my research, the founders of Gyanjyoti Library were still alive at the time of my fieldwork. I, therefore, tried to bring them together so that there would be no “tall claims,” or “omitting of somebody’s history,” or charges of “distorting the history.” This exercise I thought would also help trigger memories of the participants. Four of them, including one then current executive member of the library, came together for the discussion about how the library came into being and how it evolved over the years.

²⁸ These processes in a sense parallel recent developments in Nepali socio-political life. Hitherto excluded, marginalized groups are challenging the grand ruler-centric hegemonic “national history,” and are coming up with their own histories as they see it, which I think is a very welcome development. Such a practice, one can perhaps say, has percolated down even to the individual level. However, in so doing they are emulating the same format the rulers used; they too are adopting the same tactics that they vehemently criticized and challenged. See Onta 1997 (also 1994) for a criticism of ruler-, event-centric flat historiography prevalent in Nepal.

²⁹ They also sometimes jumped to talk about the present, share their thoughts, in which case I had to find ways to bring them back to talking about their past.

When a person was speaking, I could see that another was shaking his head in disapproval a couple of times, and even tried to correct the speaker, but the latter said, “let me finish first, and you tell what you think in your turn,” and continued. On his turn, the questioner did not directly contradict the other’s statements, but when we finished the discussion and were dispersing, he pulled me aside and complained. I fixed another one-to-one meeting with him for some other day. The younger member later told me that they (he and his colleagues) were also alleged by some founders as trying to belittle their contributions and history. This was the only time I could bring some actors together and, while it was effective in exposing the “faultlines,” it too did not prove to be very useful as I had to re-do the interviews. I therefore continued with individual biographical interviews.

After the displacement of parliamentary democracy in 1960, there was drastic change in the public political life. The Panchayati state used all four means *sām-dām-daṇḍa-bhed* (appeasement, money, coercion and division) to crack down on any sort of dissent. A few of the erstwhile political activists were forced into exile, a few were put behind bars. Some were co-opted into the system; they became part of the state machinery, capitalizing on opportunities that came by (Baral 2012, see also Parajuli 2009). In 1990 the Panchayat system, too, collapsed following the popular movement, or *jana āndolan*. After the Panchayat’s downfall, their association with the autocratic system became a burden for many, especially for those who fought for (or so they claimed) democracy in the late 1940s and also in early 1960s. Their act or “betrayal” is now looked down upon. They want to hide this “blot” in an otherwise “clean” image. However, to do so is not that easy. They are more forthcoming about their activism during the pre-1960 era but not of their political submission in the post-1960 Panchayat period. The latter is the last thing they want to talk about. Those who participated in the Panchayat System try to justify their actions (cf. Rosenthal 1991, 1993, 2002) arguing that they were directed by their leaders Suvarna Shamsheer Rana or Surya Prasad Upadhyay. They claim that “it [their participation in the Panchayat regime] was to destroy the system from within.”³⁰

³⁰ Rana and Upadhyay were two senior leaders of the Nepali Congress (NC): the former was the deputy prime minister and the latter was the home minister in the first elected government of the NC in 1959. Upadhyay was initially jailed but was later kind of coopted by the system. Rana spearheaded the party from exile (in India) after the king’s coup d’état in December 1960 when most of the other leaders were

In the materials that I collected I found a few discrepancies regarding “what” happened—on actual occurrences of events—but when it came to “who” was responsible or “who did,” the picture became all the more blurry. Basically, three types of sentences or sentence structures were commonly used, both in print, and during my interviews. Some used the first person singular, I—“I did this, I did that.” And there are instances when passive voice constructions were used, and actors were absent—“this/that was done.” But the most frequently used pronoun was the first person plural, we or *hāmi*—“we did this/that.” During the interviews, whenever I came across the word we (which was more often than not), I used to seek clarification on who this “we” referred to. I was looking for other potential respondents with whom I could talk, and also wanted to trigger their memories further.³¹ “We,” of course, signified the collective. Yet, I later observed that the “we” also was largely used when the actor perhaps had a very limited role to play, if any, in the collective, and this could well be seen as a part of the strategy to inscribe one’s “footprints” in the history pages. Let me now turn to the challenges that I faced as a “native” researcher, and how my being (or in some cases not being) the son of a local activist presumably punctured or bolstered the informants’ efforts to paint an unblemished image of themselves.

On Being a “Native” Researcher

In relatively older literature we find distinctions being made between “regular” or foreign and “native” researchers. Pros and cons of the “outsider,” who painstakingly studies an “alien community,” and the “insider” who studies her “own community” or culture have been highlighted (see Gwaltney 1976).

languishing in jail. Those jailed included the first elected Prime Minister BP Koirala who also was the president of the party. Rana initially waged an armed struggle against the royal takeover, but later suspended the struggle and even talked about patching up relations with the king. The Koirala camp, however, opposed any such decision, at least in the initial days. So, it is often the case that the NC activists who became *Pañcas* point towards Rana or Upadhyay to justify their move (see Adhikari 2059 v.s.; Gautam 2071 v.s.a, 2071 v.s.b for details).

³¹ Sometimes I would get a few names, at other times I would not, because they “could not remember.” When I inquired about the roles of the mentioned friends in the said social formations, more often than not I was told that their role was very limited or insignificant. Interestingly, the “friends” would also react in similar fashion, i.e., highlight their own roles or contributions and downplay others’ roles.

However, since the publication of Kirin Narayan's (1993) celebrated article "How Native is a 'Native' Anthropologist?," which she draws from her fieldwork in India, the idea of native-ness has been questioned. The influence of Narayan's article on the erstwhile above-mentioned dichotomy-based discussion was such that the term native (as one that connotes a member of a monolithic group of people confined to a distant exotic space) is largely shunned today, especially in anthropology, when it comes to discussing the subject position of the researcher (Jakobs-Huey 2002). Rather than one's being insider/outsider, factors like education, gender, sexual orientation, class, or race of the researcher are said to play more important roles (Narayan 1993, see also Jacobs-Huey 2002; Brown and Dobrin 2004; Davies 2008[1998]).

The open admission of involvement of the researchers with the subjects of their research is now welcomed (Davies 2008[1998]; cf. White 2002), and researchers are increasingly expected to account for how their own positionalities—as well as ways of asking and seeing—influence the production of knowledge (Rosaldo 1993[1989]; Okely 1994; Jakobs-Huey 2002; Salzman 2002). An informed reflexivity is thus argued for: "Being reflexive enables researchers to critically consider their own cultural biases and negotiate various ways of seeing while investigating and 'translating' culture(s)" (Jakobs-Huey 2002: 791). However, there are also concerns about the dangers of imbalance in the role of reflexivity. The anthropologist Renato Rosaldo writes: "If classic ethnography's vice was the slippage from the ideal of detachment to actual indifference, that of present-day reflexivity is the tendency for the self-absorbed Self to lose sight altogether of the culturally different Other" (1993[1989]: 7). It is thus currently recognized that ethnographic knowledge is in part a product of social situation of ethnographers, and that this must be acknowledged, its significance be addressed during the analysis, and also be visible in reporting findings (Davies 2008[1998]; see also Horner 2004; cf. Burawoy 1991b). Adding on to what I already spelled out in the preceding sections, in the following I would like to further clarify my positionality very briefly, as well as to share the dilemmas and challenges I faced during my field research, and also highlight the limitations of the research/er.

As I mentioned earlier, I was serendipitously drawn towards the topic of studying the history of libraries.³² But the immediate questions—Why were

³² Although libraries have been studied extensively in other parts of the world, they are still under-studied in South Asia.

members of my generation deprived of having access to public libraries? Was there a systemic strategy to prevent us from using libraries? and so on—that came to my mind perhaps have partly to do with my growing up in a political family. My father was active in oppositional politics during the Panchayat regime, and also in other social formations such as newspapers, magazines, literary societies, schools, etc. The entire family had to bear the brunt of his activism against the king-led autocratic regime. Such an upbringing shaped my worldview, and also perhaps has instilled certain biases towards/against the Panchayat System in me, though as a researcher I actively try not to let bias meddle into my research.

Though not planned, I ended up choosing my hometown as my sole research site. I had initially thought that Pokhara would be the entry point only. I was a so-called “native” researcher or insider, and the moment I did research in my hometown, I became even more so. Not only I but my father and forefathers also were born and raised in the town: Parajulis are said to be among the early settlers of the Pokhara Valley (some five centuries ago), who first settled in the northern part from where the city is also said to have expanded. They also have contributed to the socio-political development of Pokhara. They ran free “verandah schools” in their homes when there was no formal school system. The first Sanskrit school, “modern” school, college, and the hospital were all built on the lands given by the Parajulis. Moreover, my father and uncle (Min Raj Parajuli) were involved in a few of the social formations that I write about in my dissertation (Parajuli 2009).³³ In this sense my own “family history” is embedded in the socio-political history of Pokhara.

I began my research by informally interviewing my father. Apart from many other insights, it was an opportunity to get to know my father more, and also to learn about my grandfather and great grandparents whom I never met. I was not sure how my father’s affiliation and work would influence the respondents’ opinion towards me, and thereby affect my research work. I did not want them to make any a priori judgment about me based on my father’s political faith and social positioning. But then this was beyond my control and I did not want to actively deceive anyone. So, whenever asked I would tell them, otherwise I would myself not divulge.

³³ The rest of the Parajulis that appear in the dissertation, however, are not directly related to my family, apart from bearing the same family name.

To fix an appointment for a detailed or biographical interview, I used to call my respondents by phone. To a few I also paid a visit. In most cases, either during the phone conversation or during the meeting, they would ask me where I was calling from or where I am from. The moment they learned that I am from Nadipur, Pokhara they would either ask, “*Kasko chorā?*” (lit. whose son?), or “Where in Nadipur?,” or “*Keshavji ko ke?*” (meaning what’s your relation to Keshav Parajuli). I would reply that I am Keshav Parajuli’s son, but most of the time resisted the temptation of mentioning my mother’s name, who is a simple housewife and figures nowhere in the public life of Pokhara’s past that concerned me then. But that does not make her contribution in rearing me and my siblings any less valuable or consequential than our father’s. It is also equally true that had she not stood by her husband in difficult times, and shouldered the responsibility of rearing the children, he would not have been able to do all the things that he did. The reason for bringing this seemingly “personal” issue to fore is also to highlight the limitations of my research, or for that matter any other research like mine, where we fail not only to take into account the “roles” of those people who led or supported the movement from behind, but also to acknowledge their contributions. I also raise this concern because in the ongoing “history-making” or “-creating” processes that I described above—in which many of the social actors are fighting for their name to be inscribed prominently in the pages of history, or in “golden letters,” as it is said in common parlance—these “unseen” actors have largely been left out.

Most of my respondents knew my father; many of them turned out to be my father’s “friends,” and I their “son.” One would think that being “local,” and a “friend’s son” would be to my comparative advantage over any other researcher. It was of course easier to build rapport, but it also had a flip side, or at least so I sensed. During the course of research, I at times felt that the actors were viewing me through the lens of my father’s social position.³⁴ On occasions, I also had the feeling that had I not been my father’s son, perhaps the respondents would have been more forthright than they were, and had I been a “regular” researcher, perhaps I would have gained more

³⁴ It may be my own bias but I had a feeling that those who had collaborated with the Panchayat System were more courteous towards me, and often praised my father. They also showed empathy towards my father for not being able to “reap the benefits” in the post-Panchayat era (i.e., following the political transition of 1990) despite the “sacrifices” he had made to fight that autocratic regime.

access to their intimate documents, if they had kept any.³⁵ However, in a few instances when my background was not known, the respondents were found “exaggerating” their roles or contributions in the movements or in the social formations. Thus, even though I was not a “halfie” researcher like Narayan and others, my interactivity was already subject to certain relations. These relations were different than those that would come into play if another researcher from Pokhara or elsewhere from Nepal were to conduct the same research with the same individuals. Their co-production of knowledge would be subject to *other* constraints or possibilities than the ones that came into play in my case.

Having read some books and articles on research methods during the preparatory stage of my research, I was conscious of the power relations that exist between the researcher and the respondents. I wanted to mitigate those relations as far as possible. I was even unsure if I should say that I am doing a PhD. During interview sessions, a few actors asked me to “make [the interview] nicer and print/publish” (*Yeso rāmrarī milāyera chapāidinu/lekhidinu hai*). This could have two meanings: one, to make changes in their erratic spoken language to create a coherent and logical narrative, and two, to place them positively, and prominently in the “history” that I was supposedly writing. Having two practicing journalists in the family then—father and sister—and myself contributing occasionally to the media, I think, also helped to create this writer image of mine. However, this is already an indication of the “power”—or image of such power—that we as researchers and/or journalists possess (to tamper with, or portray our interviewees’ image nicely or badly).

My narrative thus is a synthesis of different versions of the stories that I collected—through published and unpublished documents—and the “negotiated” biographical interviews that I conducted during the field research. I do not claim what I’ve presented in the dissertation is the “true rendition” of the events and/or the roles of the actors involved in public life in Pokhara in the early post-Rana years. Nevertheless, in the description that I provide in the dissertation I’ve tried to triangulate the information available and supplied. I provide what I think is the most plausible description of

³⁵ When I presented a part of this article at a seminar in Martin Chautari on January 18, 2009, a few “native” researchers also lamented that the foreign or “regular” researchers were more “trusted,” and could get relatively easy access to the respondents than the “natives.”

what transpired, but the inferences that I draw or the analysis I present is mine—informed largely by the knowledgeable interlocutors.

Conclusion

In this article I charted how I came to choose the topic of my research. I elucidated how the preliminary findings—of the unavailability of documents/records, leading to selective narration, and the deep enmeshing of social formations and actors—and the challenges forced me to reflect on, and subsequently readjust my research questions.

I also showed—through also personal and family experiences—how the unavailability of historical documents and records was linked to the (repressive) nature of the regime. Incipient media, lack of public depository, and state interventions on locally established libraries (which made them defunct and perish) further exacerbated the situation. All this resulted in poor record-keeping, even of published materials, and a systematic loss of documents—both private and public. The absence of documentary artifacts increased the importance of biographical interviews further. But the very fact (that documents do not exist) also gave “smart” actors a lot more rooms to maneuver in what I have called “history-making/-writing” processes. I also showed that my own positionalities—my being the son of a famous father who played an important role in Pokhareli public life for most of the decades during the second half of the twentieth century—influenced the overall (co) production of knowledge contained in my dissertation.

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