

AN EMERGING FIELD OF STUDY IN NEPAL

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Background

Sociology and anthropology have a relatively short history in Nepal. Nepal was virtually closed to outsiders until 1950, and it was practically impossible for foreign scholars to pursue studies about the Nepali people, history, and culture. Consequently, information about Nepal and the Nepali people written prior to 1950 is scanty and scattered, mainly taking the form of the historical and descriptive writings of Capuchin missionaries, travellers, traders and British civil servants. Notable writers were Father Giuseppe (1856), W. Kirkpatrick (1811), F. Hamilton (1819), B. Hodgson (1874), and N. A. Oldfield (1880). They were not sociologists or anthropologists by training, yet their contributions are of great sociological and anthropological value.

After 1950, Nepal followed an open door policy, and as a result Nepal became a fertile field for sociological and anthropological studies. Comprised of a multitude of linguistic, cultural and ethnic groups living in a relatively small area of land, Nepal has attracted unprecedented numbers of scholars and students, mostly of Western countries and Japan, during the past four decades. Nepal is now fortunate to have a considerable number of books and research reports covering multifaceted dimensions of Nepali society and culture. Fisher (1985a), in a precise summary of the works of foreign scholars, writes that,

one of the remarkable features of anthropology in Nepal is that those foreign scholars who have conducted research studies in Nepal have tended to follow their own national trends. Thus, the British anthropologists, such as Caplan and Caplan (1970, 1972) have evinced strong interests in traditional concerns of social anthropology, land tenure, social structure, and politics. Americans have pursued various theoretical interests ranging from the symbolic (Ortner, 1978) and psychological (Paul, 1982) to ecological and economic (Fisher, 1985b). Similarly, Germans have shown strong interests in cultural history (Oppitz, 1968)

and material culture (Schmidt, 1975), while the French have tended towards detailed ethnographic accounts (Pignede, 1970). While pursuing their research studies, foreign scholars and researchers have covered all branches of anthropology: linguistic, social cultural, medical, ecological, psychological, political and developmental. Although the concern of Nepali anthropology reflects a wide spectrum of interests that characterize anthropology as a field, the foreign scholars have tended to concentrate on those aspects of life which seem to be particularly conspicuous and unique from the Western point of view.

Dahal (1984) classifies the major studies conducted by the foreign scholars in Nepal broadly into three groups:

- (1) General ethnographic studies: prominent ethnographers include Haimendorf (1956, 1960, 1964), Hitchcock (1960), Pignede (1970), Gabriean (1972) and Messerschmidt (1976);
- (2) Social change studies in relation to two or more institutions: prominent anthropologists include Caplan (1970), Caplan (1972), Roser (1955), Haimendorf (1980), and Fisher (1985b);
- (3) Development and social change studies by Macfarlane (1976), Wake (1980), and Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon (1980).

The contributions made by Nepali sociologists and anthropologists are no less important than those of foreigners. Professor Dor Bahadur Bista's book *People of Nepal* provides general ethnographic descriptions delineating cultural groups among the Nepali people. It serves as a basic guideline to those researchers who are particularly interested in studying Nepali peoples and their histories and cultures. Additional studies and research are those of Professor Gopal Singh Nepali (1965), B. K. Shrestha (1971), Khem B. Bista (1972), B. P. Upreti (1975), T. S. Thapa (1974), Shyam Pd. Adhikari (1980), D. R. Dahal (1973, 1975, 1977, 1985), Navin Rai (1973, 1975, 1985), C. Mishra (1985, 1987), R. R. Regmi (1971) and D. P. Rajauriya (1975). There are also several scholars and researchers, although not trained in sociology and anthropology, such as Tulsī Diwas (1973), P. R. Sharma (1971, 1972, 1973), Soyambhu Lal Joshi (1971) and Satyamohan Joshi (1973), whose works are nevertheless of anthropological value. However, the latter studies (mostly ethnographic accounts) have not contributed much to the development of sociology and anthropology as a distinct subject in Nepal.

### **Institutional Development of Sociology and Anthropology**

Sociological and anthropological studies and research, which from the start existed side-by-side, were engaged in by foreign researchers at the close of the 19th Century. However, their institutional base within Nepal was established only in 1972 by the Vice Chancellor of Tribhuvan University (Macdonald 1974). He initiated a separate programme in sociology and anthropology in the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies (INAS) of Tribhuvan University under the technical support of the British Council.

Initially, the program was primarily designed for both teaching and research. Professor Ernest Gellner from the London School of Economics was invited to train and supervise Nepali researchers in the field of sociology and anthropology. A few Nepali students received M.A. Degrees by dissertation in social anthropology. Unfortunately, this program was discontinued shortly after its initiation because of frequent changes in the policies and programmes of the university, changes in the status of INAS from a degree granting institute into a purely research center (now Research Center for Nepal and Asian Studies, then called CNAS), and other technical and administrative deficiencies (Dahal 1984). All these factors collectively obstructed the institutional development of sociology and anthropology in Nepal.

It was only in 1981 that a formal Department of Sociology and Anthropology was established in Tribhuvan University at the graduate level (M.A.), and later in 1985 at the undergraduate level (B.A.).

While the traditional dichotomy of sociology and anthropology is customary in most Western universities as well as in India, in Nepal the two disciplines are collapsed into subfields in one combined department. There are several reasons for this combination. Nepal consists of a large variety of ethnic communities with different languages, cultures and religions, but similar sociopolitical and economic structures. Geographically, Nepal is a small country, where both sociologists and anthropologists take the same groups as the object of their studies, even if their methodologies and theories may differ. Last, financial, administrative and technical limitations preclude the separation of the subfields into two departments.

Since initially there was no undergraduate programme in sociology and anthropology, admission at graduate level was open to all students from the liberal and professional sciences. The department's goal is to provide a broad interdisciplinary introduction to the two fields of sociology and anthropology, emphasizing the common theoretical roots and disparate methodologies that characterize the two fields. The department makes every effort to relate its curriculum

and field research to the needs of Nepal. The ultimate purpose is to provide students with theoretical and practical tools that will enable them to assist in the development of the country as planners, administrators, social researchers and teachers.

In order to meet this broad objective, the existing curriculum has been recently revised, and some new courses have been developed. In the first year, a common course on the theories and research methodologies of sociology and anthropology were given, while in the second year more advanced courses on population, ecology and development were offered. Students are provided with an M.A. degree in both sociology and anthropology. Demographic, ecological and developmental problems are major concerns of present day Nepal. Therefore, these critical issues have been given an utmost priority in teaching and research in the department.

Thesis writing or, alternatively, a field study and field report is compulsory at the graduate level. The students are encouraged to write theses dealing with current problems covering a wide range of subjects concerning population, economy, ecology, culture, poverty, health and sanitation, animal husbandry, agricultural productivity, forestry, tourism, migration and natural resource management systems. In order to encourage the timely completion of theses and contribute to academic excellence, the Human Resource Development Division of Winrock International, Kathmandu, has been providing financial support in the form of small research grants.

The Department of Sociology and Anthropology has developed steadily in a short span of time, although inadequate physical facilities and insufficient educational materials for the growing number of students are still major constraints on teaching and research. In terms of numbers of students enrolled, the Department of Sociology and Anthropology is one of the largest graduate level departments in Tribhuvan University. Since the subject is quite new and has a relatively wide scope of job opportunities, the numbers of students increases with each new academic year (from 54 in 1981 to 152 in 1989). Students have ample opportunity to meet foreign students and scholars, as several overseas university programmes, notably of the University of Wisconsin and World College West, are affiliated with the department. The department's teachers are widely trained and educated in various universities of the United States, Europe, and Asia. All faculty members have ongoing research programmes, which are frequently funded by national and international development agencies. The department has a working relation with various universities and research institutes. In order to strengthen the institutional capacity, the department encourages foreign scholars to work together with the faculty members.

### Sociology and Anthropology Towards Development

Particularly after the Second World War, sociologists and anthropologists have been playing significant roles in planning in developing countries. They have provided often highly reliable data that facilitates the implementation of programs. Their evaluation studies of past programmes have also helped improve development policy. Sociologists and anthropologists, as *social and cultural interpreters* between planners and the people, have long been concerned with the exploration and interpretation of sociocultural potentials for development, and through it, they have attempted to contribute to the development of new programs and policies.

Sociology and anthropology in Nepal have had a slightly different experience in development plans and programs. For the past few decades, sociologists and anthropologists were uninvolved in development, therefore their roles within development programs were limited. Although a small number of sociologists have been training and administering different sectors of the government, a large number pursue their own independent research, focusing mainly on purely ethnographic problems.

However, during the last few years, the academic thrust of Nepali sociologists and anthropologists has been diverted slightly from more orthodox problems to more development oriented ones. From the beginning of the Fifth Five Year Plan (1975), the government of Nepal has adopted the *Integrated Rural Development Programme* (IRDP) as a key strategy designed to improve the socioeconomic conditions of rural people. Nepali sociologists and anthropologists have been playing major roles in these programs by providing feasibility studies prior to the implementation of programs and evaluation studies after their completion. Because the government has not yet properly realized the importance of sociological and anthropological studies, and because it has emphasized administrative structure more than functions, sociologists and anthropologists (to say nothing of the people) are rarely incorporated and consulted in development programmes. Therefore, the application of sociological and anthropological knowledge in development remains limited.

In addition to the Nepali government, a large number of development projects are sponsored by the World Bank, U.S. AID, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, IRDP, ESCAP, ILO, and other bi-national and multinational development agencies and interests. These projects have dealt with, among other problems, population, family planning, health and sanitation, education, community development, forestry, agricultural development, livestock development, pasture or range management, and natural resource conservation and utilization. Nepali sociologists and anthropologists have begun to work on short-term

contract bases with the various programs as advisors, consultants, researchers, educators, and trainers.

Their roles in these programmes have been to provide information to the donor agencies and motivate the communities to accept the implementation of the programs. Their feasibility and evaluation studies have been immensely helpful to the agencies in implementing and expanding programmes. Because Nepali sociologists and anthropologists are working primarily to serve the interests of funding agencies, they have been unable to develop a particular Nepali theory of development. Nevertheless, though their roles have not yet been instituted (which has its own benefits) their involvement in development programmes can be considered a modest beginning for our field.

### Future Trends in Sociology and Anthropology

Sociology and anthropology in Nepal are still in their infancy and likely to face many changes before they fully establish themselves. The foremost challenge has to do with substantive issues. Although Nepal is endowed with many cultural peculiarities, of which one can easily choose one as an exclusive field of study, there are aspects of life that need immediate attention. Thus one problem lies in the selection of the subject of study.

In the present social, political and economic context, what should the subject of a particularly Nepali anthropology be? Should we continue to study communities as though they exemplify peculiar cultures? Or should we shift the focus to political, economic and social conditions? Should we concentrate on ecological, demographic or developmental issues? Furthermore, sociology and anthropology are afflicted with their own theoretical and methodological weaknesses. Should we follow the traditional evolutionary and structural-functional theories and methods to study our culture and society or shift to critical and historical theories and methods? Because of these problems, sociology and anthropology in Nepal are in a dilemma.

Of course, sociology and anthropology, as disciplines in the study of humanity, should concern themselves with the multiple problems of the Nepali people. However, at the present, development oriented sociology and anthropology are essential in Nepal. Unfortunately, this is complicated by the theoretical and conceptual problems faced by a developing country. Because we are still confused by different development models, including whether to pursue a socialist, capitalist, or some other road, we are unable to define, classify and conceptualize our problems within transcendent theoretical premises. We tend to understand development only in economic terms.

forgetting or ignoring other important social, political, ethical and historical dimensions.

Sociologists and anthropologists, with their broad comparative and disciplinary frameworks, can initiate development studies by means of historical methods covering multidimensional aspects of our people. The problems of Nepali people should not be understood merely on a cultural basis, since this is just as limiting as an exclusively economic or political one, for example. We should understand problems in a broader perspective. Therefore, Nepali sociology and anthropology should not merely be interpretive, rather they should be political, economic and historical in their nature.

Even if we study the cultures of our people, our attempts should be to articulate the potentials within these cultures that can contribute to the people's development. We know that our communities are rich in traditional cultural resources (e.g., *guthi* system among the Newars, *dhikur* association among the Thakalis, *nyogyar* among the Gurungs, and the *kipat* system among the Rais and Limbus). These are cultural resources that can be mobilized for their development.

With the exception of Seddon et al. (1979), Blaikie et al. (1980) and Seddon (1987), very few anthropologists and sociologists are interested in development studies, and their studies serve primarily their own national interests, if not individual ones. The foreign scholars and researchers are quite often geographically biased and culturally ethnocentric about our people. Their studies cover mainly the hill and mountain people who seem ecologically and culturally romantic to them. Very few are interested in Terai peoples and cultures. Their studies are also rather shallow historically, if not ahistorical and sometimes overemphasized, grossly simplified and romanticized, without proper historical groundings. They mostly confine their studies to small geographical areas or communities, and on the basis of these try to generalize about entire populations (if not the entire country) which have been defined a priori as significant. Their theoretical orientations have been conventional and eclectic rather than original and ground breaking (Fisher op. cit.; Mikesell 1988).

Therefore, the time has come to develop our own theories and methods of sociology and anthropology. We should develop these as they suit the needs of our country, acknowledge its history, and address the position of its people in the national and world communities. Our theories and methods should be able to identify the problems and forces facing our people, while attempting to further their aspirations. We should study our people in their social, historical, political, economic, and ideological perspectives, where our own discipline is seen as arising from these. This necessitates a renewal and reform, if not transformation or revolution, of the

theoretical models and, especially, premises of our sociology and anthropology. Accordingly, we should develop a curriculum that is at once broad and deep. If this common responsibility is shouldered by all Nepali sociologists and anthropologists, we can make our own mark on both the discipline and our peoples' lives.

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## THE PAST AND FUTURE OF SOCIOLOGY IN NEPAL

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### Establishment of the Department

The formal teaching of sociology in Nepal began with the inception of the Village Development Training Center (now called the Panchayat Training Center) in 1953. It was at that time that the Village Development Workers (VLW's) were given training about Nepali society and culture to help them to understand the dynamics of social change taking place in the society (Thapa 1974:45). The courses known by the name of rural society were confined to the training syllabus.

Because of the growing popularity of sociology in the universities abroad, its absence was felt in Nepal, especially after the episodes of social change brought out in the aftermath of the 1951 movement. Consequently, the Vice Chancellor of Tribhuvan University expressed a desire for the immediate establishment of a department of sociology and anthropology in the university. As a result, Professor Ernest Gellner, a short-term advisor from the London School of Economics, visited Nepal under the auspices of the British Council in September, 1970 in order to prepare a feasibility report on establishing a department of sociology in Tribhuvan University. Subsequently, a Department of Sociology/Anthropology was established at the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies (INAS) (MacDonald 1974; Dahal 1984). The primary objectives of the Department as mentioned by Macdonald were mainly to:

1. carry out, encourage and, on occasion, supervise systematic social research in Nepal,
2. train Nepali scientists and researchers,
3. act as a clearing house and point of contact, coordination and cooperation for the various researches carried out in the past, present and future by Nepalis and foreigners [Macdonald 1974:27].

Gellner was appointed as a Professor of Sociology under a joint agreement between Tribhuvan University and the British Council. He