

<b>Institution:</b> University of Oxford
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UOA33
<b>Title of case study:</b> Vernacular Religion: recognising religious diversity in the Nepali diaspora
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Sondra Hausner's AHRC-funded project, <i>Vernacular Religion</i>, grew out of her existing work with Nepalis around the world, and especially in the UK. Conducted in close collaboration with the Centre for Nepal Studies-UK, an organization run by Nepali social scientists for the benefit of Nepalis living in Britain, Hausner's research has taken up the multiple religious identities of the Nepali community in the UK. Based on voluntarily collected social data, her team's work led to a much clearer recognition of the specific cultural, social and religious profile of this migrant community. This information, of vital importance as British Nepalis define their identity and their roles in the wider society of Great Britain and transnationally, was fed back into the community through various channels including the non-academic publication <i>Nepalis in the UK: An Overview</i> (Adhikari, ed., CNS-UK 2012), participation in community integration programmes, and feedback sessions where findings of the team's research were discussed with community representatives, religious leaders, and policymakers.</p> <p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The Nepali diaspora in the UK is relatively small but must be one of the fastest-growing groups in the country. Nepalis were under-reported in the 2001 census, which recorded fewer than 6,000 UK residents born in Nepal. A nationwide survey conducted by the Centre for Nepal Studies UK (CNS-UK, a partner organisation in this research) in 2008 determined that over 70,000 Nepalis lived in the UK. It is estimated that the current figure is well over 100,000.</p> <p>The <i>Vernacular Religion</i> project, funded by a Large Grant from the AHRC-ESRC Religion and Society Programme, is the only one of its kind. It looks at both individual and collective forms of religious practice, and examines the lived religious experience of Nepalis in Britain under three separate headings: (1) attempts to build different forms of community and communal forms of religion; (2) personal spirituality; and (3) the propitiation of gods and spirits for help with worldly problems (e.g. illness or other misfortunes). The assumption in Judaeo-Christian traditions is that these three types of religiosity will normally be provided by a single system, but in many Asian contexts, different ritual and ideological systems provide for each of these three aspects of religion. This research has found considerable religious pluralism even within the community of Nepalis in the UK: Nepalis have created hundreds of political and community organizations in this country in the last 15 years, and household shrines show an enormous diversity of personal religious practice.</p> <p>The project included a survey of 300 households and extensive ethnographic fieldwork in people's homes and at community events. The <i>Vernacular Religion</i> team asked people about their education, work, migration history, involvement in community events and organizations, and their religious practices both inside and outside the home. One key finding is that, while there are some groups who have a clear Hindu or Buddhist identity (e.g. most Bahuns and Chhetris are clearly Hindu; Sherpas and Tamangs are definitely Buddhist), many other groups (e.g. Magars, Newars, Limbus, Rais) enthusiastically combine multiple forms of religious belonging.</p> <p>What the team has found, therefore, is that multiple religious belonging, although by no means normative or universal for South Asian or Nepali religions, is a viable and coherent stance, with deep historic roots, taken up by many Nepalis in Britain. Nepalis in Britain take up this stance in full consciousness of what they are doing; they are usually aware how such a position relates to Nepali history and how it counters British public discourse. Religiosity is a central aspect of their identity, and they deal with the modern cultural expectation that people should have a singular religious identity by quite deliberately choosing to adhere to more than one.</p>

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

#### Research Outputs

1. Hausner, Sondra L. and David N. Gellner. 2012. Category and Practice as Two Aspects of Religion: The Case of Nepalis in Britain. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80 (4): 971-997. [DOI: 10.1093/jaarel/lfs083]  
[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/spel\\_conference\\_sondra\\_hausner](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/spel_conference_sondra_hausner). [Submitted for REF 2; Hausner, N02.]
2. Hausner, Sondra L. (in press) Belonging and Solitude among Nepali Nurses in Great Britain. In *Facing Globalization in the Himalayas: Belonging and the Politics of the Self*, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka and Gérard Toffin, eds. Delhi: Sage Publications. also published in 2011 as *Nepali Nurses in Great Britain: The Paradox of Professional Belonging*: COMPAS Working Paper WP-11-90  
[http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/files/Publications/working\\_papers/WP\\_2011/WP1190\\_Hausner.pdf](http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/fileadmin/files/Publications/working_papers/WP_2011/WP1190_Hausner.pdf)
3. Gellner, David N. and Sondra L. Hausner. 2013. Multiple versus Unitary Belonging: How Nepalis in Britain deal with 'Religion'. In *Social Identities between the Sacred and the Secular*, Abby Day, ed. London: Ashgate. [Available upon request.]
4. Hausner, Sondra L. and David N. Gellner. 2012. New Home, New Religion? New Lives for Nepalis in the UK. *The Oxford Theologian* 3 (Spring):8-10. Oxford: Oxford University Faculty of Theology. (Available upon request.)
5. Gellner, David N. and Sondra L. Hausner. 2012. Religion. In *Nepalis in the UK: An Overview*, Krishna P. Adhikari, ed.:54-68. Reading: Centre for Nepal Studies UK. (Available upon request.)

#### Evidence of Quality

*Vernacular Religion* was funded through a Large Research Grant under the AHRC Religion and Society programme (2009-2013).

From the review provided to AHRC at the time of submission: 'The proposed research raises ... important questions concerning the nature of religion and religious practice.... The differentiation between different types of religions practice is also important and the proposal could provide important and interesting findings which go beyond the case study they have chosen. The aims and research questions together with the applicants' knowledge and experience in these matters thus appear to be outstanding.... The Nepali community has generated much public interest recently making the project particularly timely. The established contacts of the research team provide them with a good basis for disseminating their work to a wide non-academic audience.... The project team has good links with Nepalese organisations which would also be a major beneficiary of the project.'

From the AHRC website: 'Research on Nepalis in Britain challenges the idea that we all have simple mono-religious identities' (accessed April 29, 2013)

[http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2013\\_01/1358855418\\_Gellner\\_Phase\\_3\\_Large\\_Grant\\_BlockLW.pdf](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/uploads/docs/2013_01/1358855418_Gellner_Phase_3_Large_Grant_BlockLW.pdf)

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Overall, the *Vernacular Religion* project has contributed to public discourse around questions of Nepali identity both for Nepalis themselves and within the larger contexts of Great Britain and the globe. In an era of great cultural change across the world, where the relationships between minority communities and their host countries are being contested in every country and context, analysing the case of a nation as remarkably internally diverse and globally mobile as Nepal serves to remind interlocutors at every level – Nepalis in Nepal and abroad, as well as European local governments learning how to accommodate diversity in their own backyards – of the multiple ways difference and integration may be handled and addressed. The *Vernacular Religion* project also reminds such interlocutors of the importance of recognizing multiplicity and the possibilities of multiple belonging in the area of religion, as well as in the arena of every other identity category.

This AHRC-funded research on the religious practices of Nepali populations in the UK and Belgium (as well as back in Nepal) has both been conducted by and contributed to discussions of community and social organization within the Nepali community itself, in Great Britain and globally. The project began its quantitative component drawing from a survey that had been conducted by the Centre for Nepal Studies-UK, an organization run by Nepali social scientists for the benefit of Nepalis living in Britain. The work that CNS-UK did in reaching out to the Nepali community was conducted largely on a volunteer basis, and through community fundraising efforts. The collective will within the Nepali community to support social science about their own numbers within Great Britain was evident in the support and funding that was raised internally (and an awareness was developed early on about the difficulties in researching a migrant community, some members of whom wished to stay under the radar).

The process of pursuing the initial CNS-UK survey further developed an interest about the demographics of the Nepali community within the diaspora population: the project has built upon, and in turn contributed to, this deep interest within the community, with a particular focus on religion. A number of political issues were at stake, including, as just two examples, whether Nepalis would be named as a minority population in the census of Great Britain, and the religious demographics of the Gurkha forces, which until 2008 had only employed Hindu *pandits* or priests for its Nepali regiments, consistent with the designation of Nepal as a Hindu state. In the context of a new location like Great Britain, religious and ethnic breakdowns of the Nepali population constituted an information base in unknown terrain that had implications for issues of representation both in Nepal and in the diaspora: reliable information about religious organizations and practices could be brought to bear both on the emerging relationship between a newly arrived minority population and its host country, and also upon the internal politics of representation pertaining to religious specialists, festival events, and local temples. Social science was made real for the subjects of the research themselves, who have welcomed CNS-UK's efforts to gain information, at first prior to and now through the work of the *Vernacular Religion* project. As a result, the project has consistently been called upon to contribute information on the breakdowns of Nepali religious identification and practice in Great Britain.

In a time of vocal public debate and discourse about migration and migrant communities, the information gathered by the Vernacular Religion project has been solicited at many levels, and for many reasons. For Nepalis in Britain working to build a diverse array of ethnic, religious, regional, professional, and military social groups, data collected by the project has justified certain claims of presence within the diaspora. For Nepalis in Nepal working to build relationships with diaspora community members and wishing to keep track of religio-political movements across the world, information from the project has helped to build bridges and information networks between research and activists. For the British government, and in particular the local borough councils of Rushmoor and Surrey Heath concerned to facilitate community integration, museum personnel wanting to reflect the changing nature of the local community, and organizations wishing to better provide social services (health care, English classes, funeral arrangements) for minority or under-represented populations in general and for their famed Gurkha forces in particular, the project's material has provided accounts of a legitimate – if newly arrived – population of Great Britain.

Three particular non-academic outcomes of the project thus far are of note:

- 1) A CNS-UK publication, *Nepalis in the UK: An Overview* (K. Adhikari, ed. CNS-UK 2012). Closely supervised by Hausner, who also co-wrote a chapter for public information, *Nepalis in the UK* has been disseminated far and wide, to the Nepali community in Great Britain, to journalists, activists, and policymakers in Nepal (including ethnic and political leaders) – as well as to public libraries – and to people interested in the dynamics of Nepali history and life in the diaspora, including the Mayor of Rushmoor and members of the Rushmoor Borough Council. In Surrey, the book was given to the Mayor of Surrey Heath at the opening of an exhibition of *Nepali Connections*, a collection of Nepali and Gurkha objects at the Museum of Surrey Heath (Surrey Heath, April 20 2012) [i].
- 2) Community integration programmes (e.g. Best of Both, Aldershot, Feb 4 2012). In parts of Britain where large densities of Nepalis have settled in the last decade (due to a new law

allowing Nepali Gurkha residency and citizenship), particularly in the areas surrounding Gurkha barracks, such as Aldershot and Ashford, English residents have felt a dramatic shift in the demographics in their cities; in some cases resentment against Nepali migration has started to build. In Aldershot (Greater Rushmoor Borough, Hampshire), Hausner was asked to address the crowd of 500 (in English and Nepali) with a summary of their project during a programme called 'Best of Both', designed to bring the two communities together in a day of festivities, performance, and local craft; the Mayor was also in attendance [see sources ii & iii, in which the Mayor of Rushmoor commends the publication of *Nepalis in the UK: An Overview* as 'a timely contribution, which explores and analyses the pathways to integration']. Similarly, in Wembley, Hausner was asked to address the Non-Resident Nepali organization about the research, in order that leaders of the Nepali community worldwide would have information about the dynamics of Nepalis in Britain.

- 3) Feedback session (Aldershot, April 28 2012). The project invited key informants and respondents – including leaders of religious organizations and community representatives, as well as specialist religious practitioners – to a session where it presented its findings and invited further discussion. The event was unique insofar as rarely have these multiple strands of religious activism engaged with each other in person about beliefs, practices, and the dynamics of their engagement; in the context of a session organized by a team researching the multiplicity of Nepali religions, they were able to place themselves and their practices in a larger context, with a number of shamans comparing notes! A special bilingual edition of CNS-UK's newsletter was published for dissemination in connection with this event [iv][v].

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[i] Museum of Surrey Heath Nepali Connections Opening, April 20 2012: <http://surreyheath-residents.co.uk/2012/04/22/nepali-connections-exhibition-at-surrey-heath-museum-video-blog/>  
*Mayor of Surrey Heath, Councillor Tim Dodds, uses 'Nepalis in the UK: An Overview' to draw attention to the Nepali population in his Borough.*

[ii] Best of Both, Aldershot, February 4 2012:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a19jJeLtf90&feature=relmfu>  
*The PI, Gellner, and CI, Hausner, of the Vernacular Religion project speak about 'Nepalis in the UK: An Overview' to a crowd of 500 British and Nepali residents of Aldershot. (See minute 2:41 ff.)*

[iii] From the Mayor of Rushmoor, Councillor Alex Crawford, February 29 2012:  
<http://mayorofrushmoor.wordpress.com/2012/02/29/nepalis-in-the-united-kingdom-an-overview/>  
*Note the former Mayor's reference to 'Nepalis in the UK: An Overview' as 'a timely contribution, which explores and analyses the pathways to integration, as it is available just as Rushmoor Borough Council prepares for the first meeting of its newly formed Task and Finish Group on Community Cohesion on 8 March.'*

[iv] Feedback Session, Aldershot, April 28 2012: <http://www.cnsuk.org.uk/?option=news&id=40>  
*CNS-UK's report of the session held with religious and political leaders of the Nepali community.*

[v] CNS-UK Newsletter for public dissemination (bilingual), published April 28 2012:  
[http://www.cnsuk.org.uk/docs/reports/1336639715\\_CNS%20Newsletter-%20VR-Special-%20April%202012-%20online%20viewing\\_medium.pdf](http://www.cnsuk.org.uk/docs/reports/1336639715_CNS%20Newsletter-%20VR-Special-%20April%202012-%20online%20viewing_medium.pdf)  
*The newsletter was published for the feedback session, but is available electronically and has been widely referred to by leaders of the Nepali diaspora community*