Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya (ERSEH) – Kathmandu

Research Methodology

1. The research project on Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya (ERSEH) is aimed at examining the complex changes taking place in the Himalayas over the last half century. Through foregrounding everyday religion in urban context, the research attempts to innovatively combine the scientific and religious perspectives to study the phenomenon of change through a nuanced understanding of everyday practices of the ordinary peoples in their increasingly globalized surroundings. The research is organized by three main questions: 1) What is the relevance of everyday religion and everyday religious practice on people’s relationships with the environment? 2) How, and to what effect, do ordinary people’s everyday religious practice manifest in domains of water use, waste management, and funeral rites? 3) How have changes such as development and urbanization impacted everyday life and the relationships with the environment of people living in urban environments like Kathmandu? The research methodology proposed primarily consist of life histories, systematic observation of religious activities and behaviors that relate to environment and sustainability together with the associated moral logic and ethical concerns of the people as they are invoked in quotidian life.

2. Kathmandu valley, where one of the oldest urban civilizations thrived in the Himalayas is chosen as one of the sites for research. The valley is composed of three core cities; Kathmandu, Patan and Bhaktapur- that evolved over 2000 years of history. With its fertile agricultural land and strategic location on the trade route between the Tibet plateau and the Indian plains, the valley traditionally accommodated religions ranging from ancient Shamanism to Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism, with diverse ethnic, caste and linguistic groups. Today Kathmandu valley conjures up a cosmopolitan image under the rapid influence of globalization – the flow of information, people, goods, technology, values, among others.

3. Kathmandu is now the premier cultural and economic hub of Nepal and is considered to have the most advanced infrastructure among urban areas in Nepal. As urbanization intensifies exponentially, the environment, landscape as well as availability, and use of natural resources have dramatically altered. In addition, the on-going political struggle of the people for achieving federal inclusive democracy from the unitary system established under the erstwhile feudal monarchy, makes the process of change ever more complex.
These in turn have impacted the everyday life of people living in the urban environments in both positive and destructive ways substantially.

4. In order to explore the changing dynamics in the Himalayan valley and the people's perceptions and practices pertaining to everyday religion and interactions with environments, we propose to work in three specific locations within the valley. The first is one of the oldest settlements within the city of Patan. The medieval settlement of the Newars in Patan is a living witness to long range process of urbanization, adoption and transformation of Hinduism and the caste system, religious syncretism and modernization. The second locale is in the neighborhood surrounding the famous Baudha stupa located at a distance of about six km from the center of Kathmandu. The neighborhood around the 4th century Baudha Stupa, locally known as "Jyarung Khasyor", originally consisted of indigenous Tamang peoples. This areas has experienced a long wave of immigrations and rapid deterioration of resources during last couple of decades. The third location is in-between these two sites, in the area of Pashupatinath temple. Pashupatinath is a holy Hindu temple of the highest order among Hindus in the Indian subcontinent. Apart from receiving a large number of Hindu pilgrims, both domestic and from outside the country, the area is a meeting point for believers of many religious faiths, including Buddhist, Christian and indigenous Kirat religions. As a major place for funerals, located on the bank of the Bagmati river, this place has additional significance in understanding the relations between people’s views on life, the external world and beyond. All three places are world heritage site and offer rich empirical material and insights into the research themes.

5. Primarily, life histories, participant-observation and case studies will be employed as key methods for carrying out the research to record and explore the everyday practices of the people. Approximately 40 people from two research sites at Baudha and Patan (20 each) will be invited as key informants for collecting empirical data on live experienced related to everyday religion and environment. For life history, a wide cross-section of people from the research area in terms of gender, age, occupation and locations will be selected for in-depth interview. For comparative purposes, we aim to interview people from the old settlements and new residential areas, youths and elders, housewives and wage laborers, businessmen, ritual specialists and others. A systematic recording of observations of the daily routines of the members of these households will also be made to supplement life history interviews. A total of approximately 20 households (with some overlap with life histories) will be involved in the observation and generating family history including generational transformations in occupations, values, practices. Observation and interviews will be conducted over the period of four months from January to April 2012 with multiple visits.
6. The researcher will also employ a participant-observation approach to study the changing motivation and meaning of religious festivals and ceremonies from the perspectives of different actors. The research will entail observation of at least three major religious events. In Patan city, we will conduct detailed participant observation of Machhindranath festival, which is celebrated for good rains. In the Baudha stupa, the ritual ceremony on the full moon day of April will be observed as participants. The research period also coincides with lho-chhar, or New Year celebrated by the indigenous Buddhist population in Nepal.

7. In addition to above the life histories, and participant observation, the research will also involve three cases studies. The first case study focuses on water. The case study will look at the history of water resources in the area in terms of its availability, sacredness, and uses as well as contemporary scarcity and the pollution of rivers. The second case study will be on waste; its production, disposal and management. The third case study is on funeral rites. Most of the observation and interviews pertaining to funerals will be held in the Pashupatinath area, though we will also look at funeral sites in the Patan and Baudha area. The cases of water scarcity, waste disposal, and funeral rites, have become serious issues of conflict and concern in the valley in recent years and can shed light on important dimensions of life in a changing urban environment.

8. The empirical data produced through the above work will be supplemented by relevant and available secondary data and if possible archival documents. In line with the suggestions made during the planning workshop held in October 2010 in Kathmandu, the following key themes will be taken into consideration as the focus while generating and analyzing the information collected for the project.
   - Urbanization/globalization/migration,
   - Local knowledge and environmental changes
   - Religious practices, festivals, ceremonies etc.
   - Community composition and relations
   - Notions and practices of ethical conduct and flourishing life

9. The proposed research methods and focus will be refined further with the inputs from other colleagues working on the research project as well as from the insights generated through field experiences as research advances.

10. The research team in Nepal will consist of four members. Mukta S. Tamang will work as principal investigator. Three Research Associates will work together as a team while taking responsibility to conduct research in specific sites. Laxmi Shova Shakya, Sociologist by training with long experience of research in Patan city will work in Patan. Nabraj Lama who is currently studying MA and has experience of research related work,
including work with Mr. Anil Chitrakar (Project Advisor), will be given primary responsibility to work in Baudha area from where he comes. Siddartha Basnet who has been associated with the project since some time will be invited to carry out cases studies and observations in the Pashupatinath temple area. Although the Research associates will have specific lead on the area, they will work as a team in carrying out the work through joint field work, exchange of notes and regular review meetings with the whole research team.

11. Mr. Thomas Mathew who has been involved in the project since the beginning will assist as resource person/advisor to guide the research process. Dr. Ganesh Yonjan, who has just returned after completion of his tenure as Nepalese Ambassador to Japan last month, has kindly shown interest in joining us as an advisor. Dr. Yonjan, resident of Baudha, who has long experience of working in environment and social research in Nepal, will be an important value addition to the project.

12. In terms of time line, the field work is expected to begin from early January and continue till end of April 2012. The preliminary findings of the research will be presented in the proposed seminar in June 13-18, 2012 with the presentation of two draft papers that highlight the main research findings.

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