



# Vernacular Religion: Varieties of Religiosity in the Nepali Diaspora

A collaboration between Centre for Nepal Studies UK and the University of Oxford





## Vernacular Religion: Varieties of Religiosity in the Nepali Diaspora

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# Common Cause Research

**This case study was produced in 2018 as part of the Common Cause Research project.**

**Common Cause aimed to document and explore existing collaborative research between universities and Black and Minority Ethnic community organisations. The project was funded under the AHRC Connected Communities Programme and included partners from University of Bristol, University of Liverpool, Xtend, University of Nottingham and Runnymede Trust.**

**We hope that these case studies will provide inspiration to those thinking of engaging in collaborative research, as well as insight into the challenges and benefits of such partnerships. Our intention in these case studies is to document the relationship between the partners from the academic institution and the community organisation. We have not evaluated the projects or engaged with the project participants. However, by capturing the perspectives of the partners, we hope to understand the structural and practical support needed to initiate and run projects involving universities and Black and Minority Ethnic organisations.**

**You can find more case studies, resources and information about Common Cause Research at [www.commoncauseresearch.com](http://www.commoncauseresearch.com).**

## At A Glance

### Title

Vernacular Religion: Varieties of Religiosity in the Nepali Diaspora

### Key Partners

Centre for Nepal Studies UK  
<http://www.cnsuk.org.uk/>

### University of Oxford

<https://www.anthro.ox.ac.uk/vernacular-religion-varieties-religiosity-nepali-diaspora>

### Funder

Arts and Humanities Research Council  
and Economic and Social Research Council

### Dates

October 2009 – September 2013

### Selected Outputs

- **Published articles.**
- **A dedicated newsletter.**
- **Books 'Nepalis in the United Kingdom: An Overview' and Global Nepalis: Religion, Culture, and Community in a New and Old Diaspora (OUP, 2018).**



The seniormost member of the group from Ashford, Kent, holds up the trophy for winning the traditional dance competition at the Sakela festival (Rai ethnic group) held in Connaught School, Aldershot, 21 May, 2011. (photo David Gellner)

## Project Summary

**Vernacular Religion (VR): Varieties of Religiosity in the Nepali Diaspora (Vernacular Religion)** was undertaken over a four-year period from October 2009 to September 2013 and was jointly funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). This collaboration, between the Centre for Nepal Studies UK (CNSUK) and the University of Oxford, examined the lived religious experience of people of Nepali origin living in the UK and Belgium in relation to their: personal quests for salvation through regular religious practice; attempts to build different forms of community; propitiation of gods and spirits for help with worldly problems such as illness or other misfortunes. This case study focuses on work undertaken in the UK.

The research was supported by a survey undertaken by CNSUK in 2008 to identify Nepalis living in Britain, a figure that is difficult to establish because the UK national census 2001 did not include 'Nepali' as a specific ethnic category. CNSUK were aware that the official figure in the 2001 Census, of 5,938 UK residents born in Nepal, was almost certainly an underestimate. The CNSUK 2008 survey had multiple samples: the larger one included 5,321 families and 18,508 individuals, and it revealed that 72,173 Nepalis were living in the UK, over twelve times the number indicated in the 2001 census.

The Centre for Nepal Studies UK, established in 2006, was formally registered in 2007 as a registered private limited company, and has a charitable wing registered as a company by guarantee based in Reading. The organisation, conceived by UK post-doctoral scholars and other social scientists of Nepali origin or those working on Nepal, undertakes not-for-profit research activities. CNSUK's objective is to conduct research on issues relating to the Nepali diaspora and to communicate findings to policy makers, planners, politicians, academics, researchers and funders. Topics of specific interest include: ethnic minorities and integration; community cohesion; population and migration; social mobility; labour market;



Participants in the dance competition at the Sakela festival held in Connaught School, Aldershot, 21 May 2011. (photo David Gellner)

health; education; gender; religion and culture; conflicts; British Gurkhas; rural and international development; and the environment.

The University of Oxford is an ancient university. It does not have a clear date when it was founded but teaching in some form is said to have existed since 1096. In 2016 the University had over 23,000 students from more than 140 countries and territories.

The Vernacular Religion project aimed, among other things, to question the assumption held in some religions and by many people that either households or individuals must always affiliate with one and only one religious tradition. The project showed how this model of 'singular belonging' was not appropriate for many Nepalis living in the UK. Community participants in the project were recruited through CNSUK's survey data from 2008 and their extensive networks. A survey of 300 households (stratified by caste/ethnicity and location), selected from the 2008 database, was undertaken in 2010 as part of the Vernacular Religion project. In addition to the survey, other data was collected through visits to people's homes and attendance at community events using a range of methods including participant observation, formal and informal interviews, analysis of religious literature and texts as well as material objects. The project calls into question the assumption that people's religious identity is defined by a single faith, or no faith; an issue that is exacerbated by datasets such as the national census which allow for only one faith, or no faith, category to be selected. Many Nepali community participants followed or observed the rituals of multiple faiths and struggled to identify with a single category of religion. Findings from Vernacular religion and the CNSUK survey of 2008 have been used by a range of national and international organisations to inform their work, a number of articles have been published and findings from the project were shared with community participants through the CNSUK website and newsletters. A book, Nepalis in the United Kingdom: An

**Overview**, has been published by CNSUK and an edited volume, **Global Nepalis: Religion, Culture, and Community in a New and Old Diaspora** (Delhi: OUP), came out in August 2018 (both volumes include results from the VR survey of 2010).

## How the collaboration came about

Researchers from CNSUK contacted the academic partner, who is known for his expertise on Nepal, in 2007 to request a meeting in relation to the survey that CNSUK wanted to conduct in order to establish the number of Nepalis living in the UK. The academic partner and other colleagues at the University were unable to help with securing funding to undertake the survey, but they did provide input with developing survey questions, especially in the context of religion and community, which was one of several topics on which CNSUK were looking to collect data.

**CNSUK had just started and was a group of Nepalis based in this country, most of whom had Social Science PhDs and wanted to make use of their skills and their training. There was this very pressing issue of how many Nepalis are there in this country. And the census of 2001 recorded something like 6,000 Nepal-born people, and from their own experience, they knew that was wrong, and they also knew the British government had no idea how many Nepalis lived in the UK. So they set out to do a survey of their own with community capacity. So they got in touch with me .... They were trying to do a nationwide survey to try and actually figure out how many Nepalis there were and they needed funding. But unfortunately the way academic funding works ... it takes years to get the money, so we weren't able to help in that sense with immediate financial aid. But we were able to help in the sense that we did have some input straight away into the questions. Especially religion and community, but they had their own expertise already.**

(Academic partner)

**CNSUK were able to fundraise from their own networks and community contacts to partly fund the survey work which they mostly undertook as volunteers in 2008 and**

remained in contact with the academic partner and other colleagues at the University. The book 'Nepalis in the United Kingdom: An Overview' was produced by CNSUK with contributions from the academic partner and another colleague from the University. Money was not a key issue for CNSUK who wanted to undertake the survey, the funds raised were used to cover travel and administrative costs; researchers undertaking the fieldwork volunteered their time and skills.

**In the first UK Nepali survey there was a community collaboration, a kind of mobilisation of social capital – about 200 individuals and organisations were working for us ... and the Non-Resident Nepali Association, as the main partner, raised some funds, I think just above £16,000, for the first research. We were there to do the job, to make sure that the project is successful, no matter whether we're getting money or not, that was the most important thing. So that means we had various people ready to contribute ... that means the fieldwork was very much a complimentary contribution.**

(Community partner)

At the time CNSUK approached the University, the academic partner and a colleague were thinking about undertaking work on the religious practice of Nepalis; the initial approach from CNSUK was welcome and unexpected, presenting an opportunity to collaborate on future projects.

**So that was the first contact and since (a colleague) and I were already at that time thinking about this project which became Vernacular Religion ... it was like manna from heaven for us, suddenly we got this incredible access to the Nepali community in the UK. Because between the different people in CNSUK they had all the different sub-communities within the Nepali community and they had created these links all over. And they had this enormous database which we were**

**then able to use in Vernacular Religion. So we then put the CNSUK into the AHRC proposal (for Vernacular Religion) as our community partner.**

**(Academic partner)**

**After funding was awarded for the Vernacular Religion project, three CNSUK members were employed by the University as researchers to work part-time on the project. University and CNSUK partners had a shared understanding of 'research', 'collaboration', 'Arts and Humanities'. Terminology on race and ethnicity was a key element of the survey undertaken by CNSUK, in particular the omission of 'Nepali' as a specific category in the national census and the consequent difficulties in establishing the number of Nepali-origin people living in the UK. Generic terminology, such as 'Black and Minority Ethnic', was not used.**

**We did not use any terms like 'Black and Ethnic Minority'. And the research was about, you know, the growing number of Nepalis in the UK, largely thanks to the Gurkhas being allowed to stay in the UK. So we didn't use that term as such – Black and Ethnic Minority. Maybe this idea of Black and Ethnic Minority comes very close, to what we did even though we never used it as such. In that sense we are trying to achieve ... being recognised as a separate ethnic group. I think there's a separate category for Nepalis in the NHS now; you can identify Nepali service-receivers through that system. In the UK census of 2011, we collaborated with the Office for National Statistics. Wherever Nepalis were in a good number ... say, 100, 200 ... we put Nepali community leaders in contact with the census managers, so that Nepalis could participate in the national census as much as possible.**

**(Community partner)**

**The academic partner highlights the fact that CNSUK tried, without success, to persuade the UK Office for National Statistics to include 'Nepali' as a specific category in the national census. It is also important to recognise that within the**

**broad category 'Nepali', people of Nepali origin may use a range of terms to describe their individual ethnic identity.**

**One of the key motivations for CNSUK was to try and persuade the Office of National Statistics to accept ... they wanted to get 'Nepali' added there, but they didn't succeed in that. There was a very vivid debate within the Nepali community about which terminology to use – whether to use Nepali, whether to use Nepalese, whether to use Gurkha ... some people would like to use the term 'Gurkha' as an ethnic term, which of course is a complete minefield and doesn't really work for various reasons, but there are some people who are highly motivated to use it anyway.**

**(Academic partner)**

**Similarly, the religious categories used in the national census, with the option to select only one, are problematic. The CNSUK survey of 2008 and the Vernacular Religion project both reveal that many Nepalis have an affiliation with more than one religion.**

**What we've been finding from our own research ... both CNSUK survey as well as survey for the Vernacular Religion project, was different. We had to confront with the people from ONS (Office for National Statistics) about how to respond to some of the questions on religion in the census. Religion is an optional question; you can answer or you can leave it. But if you choose to tick, you have to tick only one – which religion you follow. That doesn't fit to the South Asian context, at least for Nepalis ... Nepalis have a kind of multiple religions. In our surveys, we had questions without prompt and with prompt – when you ask respondents questions with prompt and give the alternative, they would want to say they are**

**Hindu, Buddhist, Kirat, at the same time, but that option is not given in any of the census categories, I think anywhere in the world, that's how it is designed.**

(Community partner)

Initial contact was established as a result of CNSUK members approaching the academic partner regarding the survey they wanted to undertake and this led to the subsequent collaboration on the Vernacular Religion project. After establishing contact, the academic partner, the Principal Investigator on the project, joined CNSUK as an advisor and the academic Co-investigator also joined as a member. A shared interest in Nepal and people of Nepali origin in the UK facilitated both partners to consider and pursue collaboration on the Vernacular Religion project. A shared understanding about key terminology was already in place and race and ethnicity terminology has been a key focus for the CNSUK survey as well as Vernacular Religion; the two projects have highlighted problematic issues relating to a mismatch between how people define their own ethnic and religious identities and how these are portrayed in official datasets such as the national census.

## Developing collaborative research

The idea for looking at religious practice of Nepali people in a diaspora context was something the academic partners, who went on to be Principal Investigator and Co-investigator for Vernacular Religion, had been thinking about prior to being approached by CNSUK. After establishing contact, the idea was further developed collaboratively by both partners and was informed by the CNSUK's 2008 survey and their network of contacts.

**Well their plan (for the CNSUK survey) was to try and establish the exact number of Nepalis in the UK ... which of course is a moving target, you know, it changes from day to day. Our project (Vernacular Religion) was different – our project was specifically about religions, and it was specifically about what does religion mean in a diaspora context and how is it being re-created.**

(Academic partner)

The academic Principal Investigator and Co-investigator have both worked in Nepal, undertaken research there and speak Nepali. This, combined with an established relationship developed after the initial approach by CNSUK, are described as being important to developing collaborative work for Vernacular Religion. Both partners also brought complementary knowledge, skills and data to the table which are described as bringing complementarity to the collaboration.

**There was a good complementarity I would say, because CNSUK had a very good large set of data already. We established the number of (Nepali) people, but we had also collected data from 18,005 people. And we had an in-depth study of 881 people. So we got those data ... I think that added complementarity to the project**



Newar girls dance in ethnic dresses to represent the different ethnic groups of Nepal while the Nepali national anthem is sung at the Newa Pasa Pucha Guthi (SE London)'s celebration of Mha Puja, 18 October 2009 (photo David Gellner)

**they (University partners) proposed. I think that also helped to succeed to get the funding (for Vernacular Religion).**

**(Community partner)**

**Also complementarity of skills. So (community partner) has this background in quantitative methods, which I personally don't have, and nor does (the Co-investigator). So you know we were very much more on the humanistic side and social anthropology side, so we came with the questions, we knew what we wanted to do, but you know (community partner) had the quant skills to be able to help us do that.**

**(Academic partner)**

**Academic and community partners decided at their second meeting that they would collaborate on Vernacular Religion and jointly developed the idea for the project over several meetings. The potential benefits for CNSUK and their members working on the project were discussed and it was decided that three members would be employed by the University, CNSUK was included as the partner in all publicity and their 2008 survey acknowledged as key to Vernacular Religion.**

**We had various meetings after the project was accepted. We tried to develop instruments to capture the data from the respondents. We used some of the previous questions from the CNSUK survey, and we obviously brought a lot of community ideas you know. So we had a very engaged process of developing questionnaires/ instruments. We gave feedback, ideas and we agreed that we'll collaborate. The CNSUK database was used as a sample frame. At one point we were not very clear what the modality of the collaboration would be. We ended up being employees of the University, which was good for our career anyway. But there was full recognition of CNSUK, there's been mention on the website and**

**everywhere. We had a lot of discussions about how CNSUK would be involved at the data collection point, and in terms of publications – all those kind of things.**

**(Community partner)**

**No major challenges were encountered in developing the collaborative research other than what are described as ‘personnel problems’ relating to a greater commitment from some people working on the project than others.**

**I mean if you say were there problems – I wouldn’t say it was cultural difficulties ... like I say, both (Co-investigator) and I are anthropologists, we’ve been in Nepal, in that sense there wasn’t a problem. The problem comes more from some people in the project being more committed to it than others and those are personnel problems that have nothing to do with the fact that this is a BME-old university collaboration. It comes from the fact that people doing a research project together is incredibly ... you know, it’s like being married to somebody, it’s a very intimate relationship, you really have to trust each other and that you’re going to pull your weight. And when that doesn’t happen, then it creates resentments and problems ... but those are the kind of personnel problems you get everywhere.**

**(Academic partner)**

**The idea to look at religious practices of people of Nepali origin in a diaspora context was being considered by the academic partners and was further developed with CNSUK after deciding to go ahead with the collaboration. The partners collaborated on project design, data collection and discussed how CNSUK and its members working on the project could potentially benefit. A shared interest in Nepal and its people is described as valuable to establishing a strong collaboration and address challenges. The main challenge is highlighted as relating to some staff having a greater commitment to the project than others and that this is not unusual in collaborative research.**

## Funding

Vernacular religion was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) large grant under the Religion and Society Research Programme. The project was funded for three years from October 2009 to September 2013 with an additional no-cost extension granted for one year.

The academic partner had applied for funding to undertake research on this topic before contact with CNSUK was established, but was unable to secure funding on that occasion. The application to the Religion and Society Programme was made after establishing contact with CNSUK and agreeing to collaborate. Costs were built into the budget to employ three CNSUK members for 6 months to work on the survey for Vernacular Religion.

**We got good feedback (on the first funding bid) but we didn't get funded. Then we realised that there was this Religion and Society Programme which was very suited to our topic, so we readjusted the application, at that point we included CNSUK as our partner organisation and we wrote into the project application that would employ three people from CNSUK on a half-time basis for 6 months at the time of collecting the survey.**

(Academic partner)

The academic partner led on developing and submitting the funding application and drafts were sent to CNSUK for approval before submitting. Both partners recognised the value of working with each other and discussions prior to the funding application being submitted provided clarity about how the collaboration would work. No major challenges between the partners are highlighted regarding

the process for securing funding. A key difficulty relates to insufficient time at the end of the funding period to fully utilise the data collected and write more publications before moving on to the next project or funding bid. In particular, staff on short-term contracts have little time to continue processing data from a project when funding ends, because they have to move on to the next project or funding bids.

At the point when the funding ends you've probably only published a tiny fraction of what you could publish out of it. So you're actually publishing and working on the material from that project and you're already onto the next one. So you're trying to balance your time, it's incredibly difficult. You know people are always moving on and you've always got to get the next funding, I mean I'm lucky in the sense that I have a permanent job and therefore the pressure is less. This project has links to the Centre for Migration Policy and Society ... it's one of the leading migration studies centres in the country and its part of our department. But most of the people in it are contract researchers, so they're on these kind of 6 months ... you know the treadmill where you don't have the luxury of actually spending some time processing the data from the grant that's actually ended, because you're desperately trying to get the next one and that is something that we all face.

(Academic partner)

Both partners highlight issues for consideration by funders in relation to university-community collaborations.

- Funding projects where a partnership pre-exists the research project is helpful to avoid problems where a community partner is selected after the idea for a project has been developed or funding has been secured.

The problems arise when the partner is selected very late in the day and there's a kind of very managerial outsourcing model of research where this is a work package – you're our contractor, you do the research kind of thing – that's kind of very controlling. Whereas we were already friends, by the time we'd sort of put the proposal together there was already an established link, you know established partnership. So, to go for already existing partnerships rather than newly formed would be the advice.

(Academic partner)

- **Building in follow-on funding into projects would be beneficial to undertaking impact work whereby research findings can be developed to inform community practice that will be of benefit to communities.**

Now that these ideas of impact are coming into research, the research councils or other funding agencies could think in terms of doing more follow-ups, you know, do impact activities with community partners ... it's really a chance to translate the research findings and ideas into more community practice or benefits. What's needed is a mechanism/structure to utilise among those communities in order to translate these findings for their benefit, or to build on them for further research, in order to make research more useful and beneficial to the communities themselves.

(Community partner)

- **Follow-on funding to deepen the findings and provide more time for writing up would facilitate utilising more of the data collected.**

It ought to be built in to the projects that there is a kind of follow up. I mean obviously you wouldn't want to give it in every case or automatically, but there ought to be more possibilities for follow-on funding to deepen the findings, also

What's needed is a mechanism/structure to utilise among those communities in order to translate these findings for their benefit.

**maybe to give more time for the writing up. Because it's always the case that you've got more material than you can process.**

**(Academic partner)**

**The established connection prior to developing the funding proposal, input of community partners, and negotiation about how they would benefit from the collaboration are described as beneficial to the process of securing funding and enabled this process to run smoothly. The benefits of funding partners with an established connection, follow-on funding for impact work and to more fully utilise the data collected are highlighted for consideration by funders.**

## Undertaking the research

Academic and community partners collaborated on all aspects of design and delivery of the research for Vernacular Religion including fieldwork, data analysis and writing up. Tasks were divided to match the interest and expertise of staff working on the project. CNSUK led on the survey and quantitative aspect of the research plus some qualitative data collection such as taking notes and pictures of, and even some textual materials, from the shrines of the research respondents. The Principal Investigator and Co-Investigator led on the qualitative aspect of data collection and analysis such as participant observation, informal interviews, analysis of religious texts and material objects. The Research Assistant appointed to work on the project undertook a significant amount of work on both quantitative and qualitative research. Approaches to collecting qualitative data relating to the three key areas of interest were:

- Visiting people in their homes to observe and discuss their religious practice, to look at personal quests for salvation through regular religious practice.
- Participating in community events and talking with people, to look at attempts to build different forms of community and understand the communal and social dynamics of religion.
- Talking to people about turning to religion to address difficult circumstances, to look at the propitiation of gods and spirits for help with worldly problems such as illness or other misfortunes.

As noted above, a detailed survey of 300 households was conducted for Vernacular Religion, the households were selected from the database compiled by CNSUK following their 2008 survey. Survey data was collected through semi-structured



The Principal Investigator asking a question to Major (Retd) Tikendra Dewan, Chair of the British Gurkha Welfare Trust, Farnborough, 24 March 2010 (photo Bal Gopal Shrestha).

interviews conducted by CNSUK members and a Research Assistant who were all of Nepali origin. Most survey interviews were undertaken at the weekend because many of the community participants work long hours, some holding down two or three jobs. All staff working on the project are said to have gained knowledge about religious traditions and practices of Nepali origin people in the UK.

We wanted (for Vernacular Religion) a much more detailed survey, so we went for 300 households. The three people from CNSUK plus (Research Assistant) – they each did 75 households where there was an in-depth survey of that household. And a lot of discussion, a lot of data collected on their actual practice of religion. So it's very much more focused on religious practice – that was our (Principal Investigator and Co-investigator) particular interest. And actually they learnt a lot, because Nepal is such a diverse place, there are so many religious traditions within Nepal that somebody from say (community partner's) background wouldn't know about what the Rai ethnic group does, for example, and actually they learnt a lot about their own co-nationals and how they do their very private things inside their house.

(Academic partner)

Convincing community participants to take part in the project required sensitive communication about research and the importance of collecting data from them. The previous survey by CNSUK was helpful in this respect because people were aware of CNSUK and there was an element of trust already in place.

And, obviously, there were some people who did not have an understanding of the need or importance of research or the need for giving you data. Since you're coming to live in a new place, you don't want to be under surveillance or something similar. But thanks to the previous survey, people understood CNSUK well; some even regarded it as if it was an official statistical department in the

**country working for Nepalis. But, yes, we did have some difficult times in getting a few of the respondents to participate, but you can't expect that 100% of the people you target would participate. I think in our case we had a very high level of response; we managed to convince our respondents why this was necessary, and you know we gave them all free choice to participate or not to participate.**

**(Community partner)**

**The survey included both closed and open-ended questions which were piloted before finalising and were available in Nepali as well as English. Surveys completed in Nepali were translated into English. All staff working on the project spoke Nepali and could access support for translating sub-dialects, this supported translations to be checked for as much accuracy as possible.**

**The Principal Investigator, Co-investigator, and Research Assistant undertook home visits to observe and discuss religious practice in households and also attended community events and celebrations to talk informally with communities attending.**

**Analysis of quantitative data was led by CNSUK, the academic partners led on analysis of qualitative data. All members of the team discussed data analysis and findings at regular meetings. Several articles and other outputs have been produced, some in collaboration and others by individual staff.**

**Design and delivery of the research was developed collaboratively by both partners and consideration given to fieldwork, data analysis and writing up. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used and related tasks were allocated to match the knowledge and expertise of people working on the project. The work undertaken by CNSUK on their initial survey in 2008 had facilitated establishing contact with Nepali communities and build trust. This was helpful for the recruitment of community participants for the Vernacular Religion research, because they had an**

**awareness of CNSUK and its work. Clarity and agreement about the division of tasks prior to undertaking the research enabled the process to run smoothly and no major challenges are highlighted.**

## Roles and responsibilities

The project proposal outlined that CNSUK would undertake survey work and lead on the collection and analysis of quantitative data, and that the academic partners would lead on the qualitative aspects. Otherwise, there was an informal approach to undertaking roles and responsibilities with flexibility to help each other beyond designated roles.

One thing was pretty clear in the project document itself that CNSUK would look after the quantitative data collection part and the expectation there, whether mentioned or not mentioned, is that the data would be analysed by CNSUK-. We had a series of meetings, they (academic partners) came to Reading, so that we didn't have to travel. I think those roles were very clear, and since this was a huge project with many people involved in it, the Principal Investigator and Co-investigator, the PhD student, the postdoc, the partner organisations ... of course everybody wanted to be boss in some way, maybe in their mind, but we didn't come into conflict or anything.

(Community partner)

The core team for Vernacular Religion consisted of the Principal Investigator and Co-investigator, both from the University of Oxford, one full-time Researcher employed for the duration of the project and three CNSUK members. There was also an AHRC PhD studentship attached to the project and the student lived on a council estate for about 18 months, a location that has a large number of Nepali residents, to inform her thesis. CNSUK is described as playing a crucial role in supporting the full-time Research Assistant and PhD student.

Of course, everybody wanted to be boss in some way, maybe in their mind, but we didn't come into conflict or anything.

**The CNSUK link was crucial both for the PhD student and for the full-time researcher. I mean especially for (the full time researcher) ... he was the one who was going out full time and actually doing most of the field work. So wherever he went, the contacts he would get would be from CNSUK and they would introduce him all over the country. And (the PhD student) did a brilliant thesis ... it was a big asset to her to have access to the CNSUK network and so on.**

**(Academic partner)**

**Undertaking work on the Vernacular Religion project, over and above other tasks and duties, worked out better for the academic partner because the project coincided with his role as Head of Department, so he was spending less time in Nepal and able to undertake more research for the project. CNSUK members had to fit in their work on Vernacular Religion around their other jobs and did so by taking leave and working on the project during evenings or weekends.**

**Roles and responsibilities were informed by the clarity reached in the early stages of developing the project regarding who would lead on specific aspects of the project. This clarity, combined with flexibility to share tasks and support each other as needed, enabled an informal approach to be adopted without encountering major challenges.**

## Accountability

**Accountabilities in the project are described as operating on an informal basis, with the exception of data protection where accountability was set out more formally. People were accountable for delivering what they agreed. The Principal Investigator had ultimate accountability to funders for delivery of the project. Formal accountabilities were put in place in relation to data protection.**

**I mean from CNSUK we made almost everybody sign a document to show that they respected confidentiality, because CNSUK had collected a large amount of data and we had gone through the data protection system. I was data manager so I wanted to make sure that whoever collected the data fully followed the process, legal process. That was something extra you know on top of ethical approval (academic partner) had to go through from the department here. We had some kind of de facto understanding about the accountability. Of course, Oxford University and the Principal Investigator was, I think, the most responsible person, we contacted the Principal Investigator more than the Co-investigator... but I think we were together, everyone in all the meetings.**

**(Community partner)**

**No challenges were encountered with the informal approach to accountability. This was facilitated by good communication, trust, and established good relationships.**

## Outputs and legacy

It is envisaged that outputs from Vernacular Religion will continue to be produced and the project is likely to continue generating interest from a range of external organisations with an interest in the Nepali diaspora. Tangible outputs produced to date include:

- Several articles based on data from the Vernacular Religion project and the CNSUK survey of 2008.
- A dedicated newsletter on Vernacular religion produced by CNSUK.
- A book 'Nepalis in the United Kingdom: An Overview' providing information on a range of issues related to Nepali residents in the UK based on the 2008 survey, VR project and other relevant researches.
- Summary articles in a range of magazines and newspapers to publicise and promote the project.
- A dissemination workshop held in a popular Nepali venue in Aldershot.
- An edited book of 550 pages called *Global Nepalis: Religion, Culture, and Community in a New and Old Diaspora* is to be published by OUP Delhi in August 2018. It has six chapters written by members of the Vernacular Religion team, including three by the CNSUK researchers.

Several non-tangible outputs are highlighted. All but one field researcher had training in quantitative data collection and can apply these skills to other work. CNSUK has gained profile and received enquiries from a range of national and international organisations wanting information or support with developing their work, including the Nepal Embassy in London, the Foreign and Commonwealth



Members of the Limbu ethnic group from eastern Nepal, who are adherents of the Satyahangma tradition, perform a Mangseva ritual in Coate Water Park, Swindon, 26 May 2012 (photo David

Office, UK, and the UK Office for National Statistics. Data about the Nepali community in the UK is now available to a range of people and can be utilised in a number of ways such as to inform policy, plan services and gain a deeper understanding about this community in the UK. Greater prominence for CNSUK is described as an important non-tangible output.

**CNSUK gained a lot in the sense that it ... I mean they had these skills already, and they set themselves up in order to use those skills. It's not that this particular project gained them new skills as such, but it gave them more prominence. It maybe leveraged all these other kind of demands from ... you know which has been recognised by the Nepalese Embassy in London, calling on CNSUK for help and collaboration for various things to do with the Nepalese community in this country. And likewise when we both went to the British Embassy in Kathmandu – they were thrilled to see these publications about Nepalis in the UK and they'd had no idea that this work had been done.**

(Academic partner)

A key legacy is described as the information now widely available about the number of Nepali origin people living in the UK, their characteristics, needs, religious and cultural practice, and so on. Other projects have evolved from the collaboration on Vernacular Religion and the CNSUK survey of 2008, including work on the Gurkha Pension Policies and campaigns that both partners worked on. Their report was launched in Parliament; the work on Gurkha pensions is an example of academic and community partners working collaboratively on an issue not directly related to Vernacular Religion. Another project is looking at social mobility among people of Nepali origin in the UK.

There is greater clarity regarding ownership of some outputs than others. Ownership of data and publications emerging from the project was discussed in the

**early stages of developing the project. Publications are owned by the authors writing them, quantitative data is owned by CNSUK and anyone on the team can access it. The University and CNSUK each have their own websites with web-pages about the project. There is less clarity regarding ownership of outputs that the University might produce in future.**

**Both partners believe that the project has achieved more than it set out to do, knowledge has been generated about religious practices of Nepali origin people in the UK. The work interconnects with the survey conducted by CNSUK in 2008 and there is significant interest, from several national and international bodies, in the outputs of both projects. Local authorities in the UK can also use the information generated to inform and plan their work with Nepali origin communities.**

## Structural inequalities

Work undertaken for Vernacular Religion and the preceding CNSUK survey are described as intending to address the structural inequality relating to a lack of knowledge about a particular community, the Nepalis. Other structural inequalities are acknowledged, such as the lack of Black and Minority Ethnic staff at senior levels in universities, highly skilled Nepali migrants undertaking low-skilled and low-paid jobs in the UK, and that greater attention is needed to address these inequalities and their impact on knowledge production.

Most of the research we do tries to address inequality. But clearly, yes, I think these issues cannot be ignored, I think maybe they need more attention. The workshop I organised in Reading in 2008 was all about this ... having initially no idea at all how to proceed in this country – many people came here as highly skilled migrants, having a good level of education, holding good positions in government and other organisations back in Nepal – were coming here and doing 'low-level' menial jobs or those kind of things and not knowing at all how to get ahead.

(Community partner)

The academic partner describes the caste system in Nepal as contributing to Nepalis having a good understanding about structural inequality.

I mean, Nepalis understand structural inequality very very well, because it's a caste society. Caste is a traditional system of structural inequality, that's what it's about. And that's what our current project (following Vernacular Religion) is all about, is trying to understand why is it that Brahmins do so well in a modern competitive situation compared to all other groups, but especially compared to

**Dalits, you know. And why is that? You know there are various structural things, but there are also other cultural ... there's a question of cultural capital. Even Brahmins from very poor backgrounds, who don't have elite contacts, do not go to expensive English fee-paying schools, still seem to succeed better on average in general and it is very striking.**

(Academic partner)

**The community partner relates that obtaining good academic results does not necessarily guarantee good employment prospects due to structural inequalities and Nepalis are aware of this.**

**There are many barriers and many ... you know getting good results in school or college is not necessarily a guarantee for you to make progress in terms of occupational achievements, and clearly structural inequality comes in there too. Many Nepalis were found thinking in those terms. And in the book that I edited, has a chapter, which shows most people we interviewed clearly think that there is some kind of discrimination.**

(Community partner)

**The CNSUK survey of 2008 and the Vernacular Religion project have aimed to address the structural inequality regarding a lack of reliable national data about the numbers of Nepali residents in the UK, their profile and characteristics. The national census, which is applied to the planning and provision of a range of policies and services, does not provide reliable information about this community and is an example of a national dataset that can contribute to structural inequality. Structural inequalities are described as impacting on the Nepali community in a number of ways including lack of progress in education and employment; many well-educated and well-qualified Nepalis have jobs that do not reflect their education and skills though the situation is slowly getting better over time. Nepalis in the UK are said to understand structural inequalities in the context of their**

**Most of the research we do tries to address inequality. But clearly, yes, I think these issues cannot be ignored, I think maybe they need more attention.**

**experience in the UK as well as in Nepal where the caste system is described by the academic partner as based on structural inequality.**

## Representing communities

Community participants for Vernacular Religion were recruited from the database compiled by CNSUK based on their nationwide survey undertaken in 2008, which was widely publicised through a range of community organisations and media. Many organisations and individuals from the Nepali community helped with various tasks relating to the survey which identifies people by sub-ethnicity. Selecting 300 households from this survey database is, therefore, described as facilitating a good level of national representation of Nepali origin people in the UK.

I and a colleague of mine went to British Gurkha broadcasting services radio station, we gave an interview there, and we had a television interview too. We had a very close partnership with the Non-Resident Nepali Organisation UK Chapter, the major umbrella body for the Nepali diaspora and their organisations. We had a very good partnership with them; we had a press release together, and many people contacted us as if we were the ONS (Office for National Statistics) to send them the questionnaire. It was because in 2008 census we mobilised many community organisations and individuals, about 200, as volunteer enumerators or supporters. So people understood us as a non-profit making, really community-empowering expert body and a think tank. We have the only database that basically can tell you the proportion of the people by sub-ethnicity – the UK census will never ever count that. But many community people worked on the project themselves, so they helped. We had a big dissemination programme; we issued them with certificates to thank them for being our partner. So, yes, we had clear national representation I would say.

(Community partner)

But many community people worked on the project themselves, so they helped. We had a big dissemination programme; we issued them with certificates to thank them for being our partner.

**Significant attention was given to developing survey questions and translations between Nepali and English languages. A good level of translation between the two languages was supported by the fact that all members of the core team spoke Nepali and some also spoke other Nepali languages, such as Limbu and Newari. Translations were checked for accuracy by team members.**

**The good thing is that all members in the research team, including Principal Investigator and Co-investigator, could communicate in Nepali. That's the good thing. All members of CNSUK, had no problem at all – their native or main language was Nepali. And some other members could speak an ethnic language such as Limbu. We designed questionnaire in Nepali, we collected data in Nepali ... though we had questionnaire in English as well. We did piloting. The questionnaire was administered in Nepali, so that means people could clearly say whatever they wanted, and later translations were made into English.**

**(Community partner)**

**Data collected through qualitative approaches also benefitted from people collecting it being able to speak Nepali and English. No specific challenges are highlighted in relation to translation of data, other than the usual issues of retaining authenticity when translating from one language to another.**

**Apart from the inherent problems of translation anyway, I don't think they were any more than the usual problems of translation. We had lots of checks built in.**

**(Academic partner)**

**The approach taken to recruit a sample of Nepali community participants for Vernacular Religion is described as achieving a strong nationwide representation and benefited from the work CNSUK put into developing and undertaking their 2008 survey. All core team members being able to speak and communicate in Nepali,**

**combined with careful checking of translations, was helpful to keeping translations of data as authentic as possible.**

## University–Black and Minority Ethnic community collaborations

**Both partners highlight a number of messages for others thinking about undertaking similar collaborations.**

- **Engage with each other from the beginning to design the project and ensure each other's roles are clearly defined and understood.**
- **Recognise that there are a wide variety of community organisations, CNSUK is also a research organisation but others are not and may not necessarily understand 'research' or how it can benefit them. Research with organisations who do not have a strong focus on research would require roles and responsibilities to be set out in a way that matches their skills and expertise. The academic partner describes that collaborating with a community partner committed to the idea of research was an advantage for the University and made a big difference to undertaking the Vernacular Religion project.**
- **Maximise impact for communities by undertaking follow-on work that links the outcomes of collaborative research into beneficial impact for communities.**

**Achieving equal partnerships requires understanding the different situations and motivations of potential partners and what would benefit them.**

**I mean it works differently for different partners. We are a research-based organisation – everybody in our team had a career desire and it perfectly worked for us to be employees of Oxford University and also keep our status as community partner. For other partners who do not have a career thirst, for them**

**maybe the funding modality works differently if they want the sums of money coming to their organisation... but, you know, it totally depends on the situation.**

(Community partner)

The collaboration on Vernacular Religion is described as being as equal as it could be within the constraints of wider structural inequalities. Collaborative projects can be at opposite ends of a spectrum whereby: at one end there is the contracted out, extractive model of research that can have quite an impersonal element to it; at the other end is a much more collaborative model in which the partners are committed to the research topic and have a shared understanding about the issues. The latter model is described as a much more collaborative, egalitarian way of doing research than the contracted out, more extractive model.

## The future

**CNSUK and the academic partner are likely to continue collaborating on future projects, indeed one of the members working on Vernacular Religion is now employed full-time by University and continues to work with the academic partner. They have worked together on one project funded by the University of Oxford, another funded by the ESRC and were applying to secure funding for another project at the time of interview. The academic partner also supports research undertaken by CNSUK and is an advisor to the organisation, the Co-investigator has joined CNSUK as a member. There is an intention to build CNSUK's capacity to undertake its own research with advisory input from the University.**

**As a consequence of having worked together on this project, we applied to Oxford University and we got 18 months of money to do a pilot on this Caste, Class, and Culture project, and then we put in for a big ESRC grant which we got. So that's now coming to an end after 4 years. We're planning the next one which will hopefully be successful, we'll be looking at cooperatives in Nepal. Yes, one thing leads to another. So, yes, it's been successful in that sense. The current project is about Nepal and so is the next one, so we're not going back to studying the Nepali diaspora. There are the small side projects that CNSUK is doing and we are supporting. But we're trying to build CNSUK's capacity to do that research basically with us as advisors rather than the actual researchers.**

**(Academic partner)**

**The connection between CNSUK and the University of Oxford is now well established following the initial encounter and collaborative work looks set to continue.**

**We're trying to build CNSUK's capacity to do that research basically with us as advisors rather than the actual researchers.**