

The Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture 2011

Globalisation in Nepal

Theory and Practice

James F. Fisher

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This is the full text of the Mahesh Chandra Lecture 2011 delivered by James F. Fisher on 17 August 2011, at The Shanker Hotel, Kathmandu, as part of the conference 'Changing Dynamics of Nepali Society and Politics' organised by the Social Science Baha with the Alliance for Social Dialogue and the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies. Social Science Baha acknowledges the support of the Embassy of Switzerland, Kathmandu, and the Open Society Foundations, New York, in making the lecture and the conference possible.

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Back cover shows Mahesh Chandra Regmi in the audience at the inaugural lecture on 24 April, 2003. Photograph by Bikas Rauniar.

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First, I want to express my deepest thanks to the sponsors of this event for inviting me to deliver the annual Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture. It is not only an honour to remember Mahesh Chandra Regmi, whose monumental work on land tenure systems is of such fundamental importance to understanding the history of Nepal, but it is also a great personal honour to follow in the footsteps of the many distinguished scholars who have delivered the Regmi lecture before me, especially my friend, mentor, and personal hero, Harka Gurung.

This is as good a place as any to say that my entire intellectual development and career have been formed and immeasurably enhanced by my association over the decades with truly exceptional Nepali scholars, both within and outside the academy. I cannot imagine what it would have been without them. Whatever modest contribution I've been able to make over the years has been due to the influence of remarkable writers, thinkers, and friends such as Dor Bahadur Bista, Rishikesh Shaha, Meena Acharya and Bihari Krishna Shrestha. I do not forget my many extraordinary colleagues at Tribhuvan University, including Chaitanya Mishra, Krishna Bhattachan, Ram Bahadur Chhetri, Om Gurung and Dilli Ram Dahal, among others—you all know who you are, and that you are too many to mention.

Now, then, for my remarks this afternoon. This lecture does double duty, since it also serves as the keynote address for the conference on 'Changing Dynamics of Nepali Society and Politics', organised by the Social Science Baha, the Association for Nepal and

Himalayan Studies, and the Alliance for Social Dialogue. 'Changing Dynamics of Nepali Society and Politics' is an ambitious topic indeed. Those of you participating in the conference can choose to address whatever part of that mouthful of words you wish. Somehow I take it that I should cover all of it. If a single word can summarise the experience of Nepal in the first decade of the 21st century, that word is surely 'change'. But the conference topic is not just 'change', or 'dynamics', but, doubling the ontological question and quadrupling its complexity, 'changing dynamics' – which I take to be not only change or dynamics themselves, but the meta-question of how change itself is changing. And not just Nepali Society, which I feel marginally comfortable discussing, but also Nepali Politics, a topic which represents much more precarious and treacherous ground.

In any case, I have certainly noticed no lack of change in Nepal since I first came here almost 50 years ago, in 1962, when there were virtually no hotels or restaurants in Kathmandu, and rarely was a car seen on the streets of the nation's capital. Sometimes I'm asked, what is the biggest change I've seen in all this time? I like that question because it's so easy to answer: the biggest change I've noticed, especially when I'm off trekking in the remote and difficult terrain of Dolpa, as I was doing earlier this year, is that I'm no longer 22 years old.

This raises the important point that the anthropologist, far from being a disembodied and unengaged objective spectator, is ageing and changing along with the people – the observer and the observed are wearing the same watches. It is not always easy to distinguish between what has actually changed in the observable, empirical world, on the one hand, and, on the other, the dissimilar perceptions held by a naïve, wet-behind-the-years recent college graduate versus a recently retired professor. Both the Nepalis I have known over the years, and I, are not only a little older, but maybe even a little wiser, although whether my wisdom has kept pace with theirs is another matter.

But young or old, since those early days I have observed and sometimes participated in change in a variety of venues through

involvement in long-term, in-depth experience and study of a small number of small places, as is the anthropologist's wont. It's not so much that anthropologists study small places – usually villages – as that they study 'in' villages, where they examine the same things that other scholars study in other places, whether large (such as nations) or small (such as individual human beings), or even places where there are no real flesh-and-blood living people, as in literature. That is, we study things like honour, ambition, bravery, fear, loathing and death.

I want to mention three separate instances of changing dynamics, which, at first glance, seem utterly unconnected: the first is the Sherpas of Solukhumbu, now famous around the world for their strength, stamina, mountaineering abilities, and of course for Tenzing Norgay's achievement of climbing Mt. Everest in 1953. I first went to Solukhumbu in 1964, and continued to visit there off and on for 40 years. Of all the many ethnic groups in Nepal, they are least in need of an introduction. The second is the farming and trading Kaike-speaking Magars of Dolpa, who are, by contrast, not famous even in Nepal, and about whom many of you will not have heard. I spent an uninterrupted year with them in 1968 and 1969, mostly in the single village of Sahar Tara, which, with a population of 365, was the largest village, at that time, in Dolpa. I returned to Dolpa, after a lapse of 42 years, in March and April of this year. And the third example is an influential political figure, Tanka Prasad Acharya, with whom, along with his wife, Rewanta Kumari, I held extended conversations in the late 1980s and early 1990s about the beginnings of democracy in Nepal and his role in founding the first democratic political party in the country, which led a revolt against the Ranas.

Indeed, these three spheres are unconnected in almost every way imaginable, and I sometimes wonder how I ended up in such different parts of the country with such different kinds of people following such different ways of life. The prospect of speaking to you this afternoon gave me pause, and made me realise the time had come to talk about what I had been doing, in addition to what I thought I had been doing, in these places all this time.

As a result, I hope to show that, despite all their multiple differences, they share two analytical commonalities: one is that they all are, or were (in the case of Tanka Prasad), undergoing the process of globalisation, but an aspect of globalisation not normally recognised as such, and discussed even less. The second is seen through an emphasis on what in anthropological jargon is sometimes called 'practice' (Bourdieu 1990), a term as obscure as globalisation is common, and which I will try to clarify momentarily, but which for the moment we can take as the idea that human behaviour is generated more by the things that we actually do than the beliefs that we hold. Since all this happens on a more or less unconscious level, this entails the ancillary proposition that since we do not know what we are doing, what we do has more meaning than we know. The rest of my remarks will attempt to expand on these two portentous notions.

Let me start with globalisation, a word first coined as recently as 1950, but which has achieved such common currency that one can hardly avoid it now in any newspaper, magazine, TV programme, or even internet blog. It is a word which sounds as if its meaning should be transparent and unproblematic, but which becomes harder to pin down the more closely one examines it. What does it ultimately amount to? At its conceptual core it might be defined as the expansion and intensification of social relations and consciousness across time and space (Steger 2009: 15), while time and space themselves are dramatically compressed. Or, more briefly still, it may be thought of as a long-term but accelerating historical process of growing worldwide interconnectedness (Pieterse 2009).

Of course, broadly understood, globalisation is not a recent process at all. It has been underway for a very long time, as long as human populations have been moving from place to place, whether across a river, a mountain range, or an ocean, transporting ideas and ideologies, including religions, along with the material goods they carry with them. Certainly one might argue, in the Nepali and American cases, that globalisation has been a fundamental part of their national histories, with unending, successive waves

of immigrants from all directions, beginning hundreds and even thousands of years ago. These population movements constitute a doubled-edged demographic sword: they have both contributed to and helped resolve many of the problems these two nations face today.

Not only is globalisation old as a social and demographic phenomenon, but even the antiquity of its self-conscious genealogy is old, as seen in the reply Diogenese Laertius, the 3rd-century historian of philosophy, made when anyone asked him where he came from. His answer was always, 'I am a citizen of the world.' However, today I focus only on recent stages in the growth of that globalisation, changes that dramatically altered its pace, scope, depth, and character as the last half of the 20th century came to a close and the 21st century began. I do so in a very limited and small-scale way – again, the anthropologist's predilection – yet what at first glance might seem to be minor developments hardly worth mentioning may in the long run decide the shape of events that ultimately carry the day.

Definitions notwithstanding, unlike other '-isation' words, such as industrialisation, urbanisation, westernisation, modernisation, and even the popular derivative term, 'development', all of them terms that seduced the post-World War II world, globalisation remains a vague and elusive concept, even as it is largely displacing those '-isation' words (Tsing 2000).

Therefore, I suggest that what the term 'globalisation' needs to flesh out its substance is not more bloodless abstractions of the kind I just quoted, or an exegesis of 'world-systems theory' of the sort espoused by Wallerstein, but 'real-life examples capable of breathing shape, colour, and sound' into it (Steger 2009: 2). This is easier said than done, however, because although the effects of globalisation are, like those of culture, powerful, the people doing the globalising, or being globalised, are, again, as in the case of culture, not necessarily aware of them.

If I may briefly jump ahead of my three examples, this was certainly the case with the first batch of Peace Corps Volunteers to Nepal in

1962, when a small group of 70 people, previously unknown to each other, exemplified the expansion and intensification of worldwide interconnectedness by being caught up in the sudden, globalising pulse that dramatically interrupted their everyday lives. Americans, some of whom had barely been off the farms they grew up on, or had never flown in an aeroplane, suddenly dropped out of the sky into Nepal. Whatever effects they may have had or not had *on* Nepal, during their two years *in* Nepal they encountered conditions which were utterly and entirely novel to them along a variety of dimensions: religious (Hindu and Buddhist), familial (joint family), political (absolute monarchy), educational (rote memory), and dietary (*dal-bhat*). These dimensions of existence globalised them profoundly, although they didn't think of it that way. Whatever occupation or life they followed in the next 50 years, Nepal remained a formative and ineradicable part of their lives. Inexorably bonded to it, they were unalterably transfigured and transformed by their intensified connection to it.

That itself is of only anecdotal significance; what makes it important is that they then returned to the US, where, already globalised by Nepal, they spent the rest of their lives globalising the American communities they lived in by explaining and illustrating the facts of life in Nepal as they saw them (and probably progressively exaggerating them), through nothing other than being part of the institutional routines of everyday American life—schools, churches, civic organisations, jobs and the like. As a result, although most Americans would still have trouble locating Nepal on a map, few would now mistake Nepal for Naples, as many of those Peace Corpsmen did when they first learnt of their assignment 50 years ago.

This is part of the story of how American society began to experience seismic changes, about a half century ago, in politics, gender, race, and profession, aided and abetted by a new wave of unprecedented voluntary peace activism. The identities of individual Volunteers, and the Nepalis who got to know them, were challenged, forged and altered. What has happened to them, to Nepal, to the United States, and to the world since then is as much a

part of globalisation as currency exchange rates. The subject/object dichotomy disappeared because we were wearing the same watches. These developments have been part of a transformation of American society and, to the limited extent that I, as a *kuire* anthropologist can understand it, Nepali society.

It's true that all this involved basically the people of only two nations, but to beat a conceptual retreat by calling it nothing other than an instance of 'internationalisation' and asserting that the world consists of just a couple hundred nation-states, ignores some fundamental realities about how the supposedly international world works. The trouble with the 'internationalisation' stance is that it ignores the existence of large and influential but non-national organisations such as Exxon, which has a larger economy than that of New Zealand. Globalisation is alert to what internationalisation overlooks.

That is one of the problems with conceptualising globalisation—the assumption that it is mostly about economics. Indeed, economists have successfully hijacked the term, as they often do—after all, it is an ill wind that blows no economist good. What needs to be emphasised, by contrast, is that globalisation involves more than just four trillion dollars worth of currencies being transacted every day, because globalisation is also a human phenomenon—as illustrated by such facts as that at any given time 500,000 people are sitting on aeroplanes. That is an economic fact of importance to the airline industry, but it is also important to those who are going to new places and meeting new people, which will cause them to see the world and their place in it in a new way. Globalisation is social and cultural, but it is more than that; it is also experienced by individuals, grappling with it one at a time.

My argument rests on the assumption that Peace Corps Volunteers can be seen as data points in the continuing paradigmatic shift that altered the United States and Nepal during these roughly 50 years. One might object that 70 Volunteers in a country of eleven million (the population of Nepal at the time) could not make any impact worth thinking about. But first of all, this ignores the fact that over a period

of two years each Volunteer interacts with hundreds of Nepalis, and secondly, that their relations, some of which are conducted in the fractured Nepali of the Volunteers, are often personal and of some depth. But to return to numbers: what about 3,000 Volunteers, which is the number who had served by the end of the tenure of the Peace Corps in Nepal in 2004? Or, of the many more thousands of Volunteers from other nations, such as Japan, UK, Germany, or Denmark, who came to Nepal, or the 100,000 or so NGOs in Nepal—many of which, at various levels of involvement, comprise still more examples of on-going globalisation? Or, 200,000, which is the number of Peace Corps Volunteers who have served in some 139 countries over the last fifty years, or all those from many countries who have worked in such multinational organisations as Crossroads Africa or Doctors Without Borders or Wildlife Conservation Society?

Globalisation, in this more comprehensive, social sense of the term, is everywhere, even if we do not count the 880 million international tourists who travel every year. Therefore I want to proceed along the lines of Giddens' argument (2000: 30) that 'Globalization is not only about what is "out there," remote and far away from the individual. It is an "in here" phenomenon too, influencing intimate and personal aspects of our lives.' Some might argue that globalisation is a taken-for-granted macro context and too abstract and unwieldy for anthropologists to handle. But if that objection can be challenged by investigating Wall Street investment bankers ethnographically, as has been done (Ho 2008: 138), then Peace Corps Volunteers and citizens of Nepal can certainly also serve as grist for the globalisation mill.

Looking at globalisation as it plays out in these kinds of organisations this way contextualises it, localises it, and grounds it in the lives of real people living in real time in real space. Working on a smaller canvas like this results in a picture featuring more vivid contrasts and sharper detail than can be seen in the vast but impersonal panorama of capital and labour transfers. Framing the picture in this way allows us to interpret the picture at its own indigenous level, rather than prescribing, from far and above, how

the picture should be drawn. Unlike the artist, the actors, such as Peace Corps Volunteers and Nepali citizens, had no idea that they were stock players in a world-wide tableau.

As a vernacular buzzword the term 'globalisation' means different things to different people. Ironically for a neologism, it is multireferential: 'part corporate hype and capitalist regulatory agenda, part cultural excitement, part social commentary and protest' (Tsing 2005: 71). In the 19th century and for the first half of the 20th, globalisation in America was construed positively: a chance to bring literacy and civilisation and, often, Christianity, to the rest of the world, which was in turn a huge, untapped market for American capitalists and a source of much needed labour to build railroads, develop industry, and farm the land in America. Nowadays, by contrast, the general American public sees globalisation as the beleaguering force behind such painful and unpleasant developments as sweatshops, outsourcing, out-of-control immigration, and worldwide upheavals involving institutions such as banks and financial markets. Nepal, forced by poverty to engage in some of these activities, usually ends up on the short end of the globalising stick. But, not always, as I try to show next.

Specifically, I now examine globalisation as it has been illustrated and played out in three Nepali instances. Thus, I concentrate on how one small piece fits into the larger and historical globalising puzzle rather than dwell further on the meta-notions on which the notion of globalisation is putatively constructed. There are already enough polemics and profundities surrounding these ideas in the world. The Nepali cases are instructive because while they are externally so different from each other, they nevertheless share the phenomenon of being subject, one way or the other, to the pervasive and relentless impact of globalisation.

When I first visited the Sherpas in 1964 I had to start walking from Banepa. Fourteen days later I reached Namche Bazaar. Solukhumbu Sherpas had been globalised for close to a century by migrating to Darjeeling in search of mountaineering and other kinds of employment (and nearly five hundred years before that

by migrating from eastern Tibet into Nepal), but life in Khumbu itself continued pretty much as it always had. I recorded six foreign tourists in Khumbu during all of 1964, not counting members of Sir Edmund Hillary's expedition, of which I was a part. That compares with the 30,000 who visit Khumbu annually now. What were Sir Edmund and the rest of us up to? What we thought we were doing, by building a little dirt airstrip on patches of uncultivated jungle and a few steep potato fields at a tiny hamlet called Lukla, was providing a way to service the medical clinic scheduled for construction in Khumbu a couple of years later.

What we actually were doing was very different—we were providing a facility that would soon funnel tourists in enormous numbers into Khumbu, as travel time was reduced from two weeks to 40 minutes. Although it seems implausibly naïve in retrospect, the thought that tourists would want to fly in to our little airstrip so that they could see Mt Everest, never occurred to us. We were blissfully unaware, in true globalising fashion, of what we were doing. What had been a scattered settlement of six or eight small farm houses was transformed into a boom town; an asphalt runway eventually replaced the dirt strip, and, I suppose inevitably, a VIP lounge provided the ultimate finishing touch. In the wake of the airstrip, all up and down the Dudh Kosi valley, from Lukla to Everest Base Camp, there arose an efflorescence of, first, lodges, tea houses and hotels, to be followed, a little later, by pizza parlours, laundromats and internet facilities. The time and space compression which accompanies modern globalisation has been almost total.

But in the characteristic way globalising works, I didn't notice the even more profound ramifications of our projects: the effects of the schools we were also building in Sherpa villages. As with tourism, the rest of the world became a part of the Sherpa villages, but this time via education, and with fundamental consequences: literacy in the Nepali language for integration into the nation, knowledge of the English language for integration into the rest of the world, study of all the standard subjects—mathematics, science, geography, history and so on—which produced a modern world view.

But globalisation is no more simply a modernising or westernising affair than it is a homogenising one. Globalisation must be read instead as a complex process that brings the West to the rest and the rest to the West. 'It must be understood, in short, as a process of mutual imbrication' (Inda and Rosaldo 2008: 25). In the Sherpa case, the process was demonstrably not one way; trekkers were gripped by the Sherpa lifestyle and especially the religion, and nearly as many Sherpas have travelled to the rest of the world as foreigners came to Khumbu. There are now more than 5000 Sherpas in New York City alone. The West and the rest met and globalised each other in Khumbu. Neither would be the same again—both different from what they had been, but also different from each other.

Most important for its long-term impact on Sherpa life, through education, Sherpas were able to take command of their own economy and therefore their own destiny; instead of serving as high-altitude mules for non-Sherpas, usually high-caste owners of trekking agencies, Sherpas founded, owned and operated many of the tourist companies which would otherwise have exploited them. As a consequence, many Sherpas now own up-scale houses in Kathmandu in addition to their homes in Khumbu, and live in one or the other according to the season—agricultural as well as trekking and mountaineering.

At first glance the people of Dolpa seem very similar to the Sherpas: northern border residence, Tibeto-Burman speaking, Buddhist, agricultural/trading economy, remote. As was the case with Khumbu, my first trip to the Tichurong valley in Dolpa in 1968 was a two-week trek, starting from the trailhead in Pokhara, which itself could only be reached by air in those days. As in Khumbu, an airstrip subsequently built in Dolpa cut that travel time from two weeks to 40 minutes. A major difference, however, is that Dolpa people do not live at the foot of Mt Everest. To this day relatively few tourists are attracted there. But, in its own more modest way, Tichurong has been globalised and globalising for many decades, and probably centuries.

They have traditionally traded their millet and buckwheat for rock

salt from Tibet, which they then exchanged for rice and manufactured goods in the lower hills of Nepal. Just as they transported goods between contrasting ecological zones, they also were in the middle culturally, between the northern, Buddhist Bhotes and the southern, Hindu, Nepali-speakers, populations which generally didn't know each other's language and did not travel to each other's territories—hence the critical role of the interstitial Magars who spoke both languages and travelled to both areas. For good measure, and as a way of making their ethnic diversity even more complicated than it would otherwise already have been, they threw into the mix their own distinctive language, Kaike, spoken by about a thousand people in only three villages in the world.

As village schools arrived in Tichurong, much more slowly and less well equipped than they are in Khumbu, increased mobility for Dolpalis has been slower to develop. But gradually more education has enabled some Tichurong villagers to begin to expand into larger, more lucrative parts of the national and world economy. Alongside the traditional trade in salt, grain, and small-scale manufactured goods (e.g., cloth, tennis shoes, cigarettes) a few entrepreneurs have entered the world of Tibetan carpet manufacturing in the Kathmandu Valley. In doing so, they, or rather their children, also begin to lose their Kaike language, but retain cultural strength in other ways by residing near each other in the Boudhanath area, and renting meeting halls where they celebrate Tichurong holidays communally.

In very recent years they have been well positioned to harvest yarsagumba ('summer plant winter insect' is the literal Tibetan translation) from the high pass located just three hours above their villages. This crop, regarded by the Chinese as a potent aphrodisiac (and sometimes referred to in English as organic Viagra), is vastly more lucrative than they could have dreamt of previously. In a month or two a family might gather enough yarsagumba (one or two kilogrammes) to earn two or three hundred thousand rupees, cash income far in excess of what they could have earned before. Even more than with their traditional trans-Himalayan trading, and investments in Tibetan carpet manufacturing, the yarsagumba trade

takes them very far afield, in a few cases to destinations as distant as Hong Kong, China and Singapore. All this is activity by people whose movements had been largely restricted, until very recently, to within the borders of Nepal, although the goods they trafficked in – the economic side of globalisation – came ultimately from Tibet and India. People whose social life outside their villages had not gone beyond entering a tea shop on a dusty trail in western Nepal now march self-confidently into the Hyatt Regency.

These changes have come mostly at a slow pace; the Dolpali are obviously aware of their new opportunities, and take advantage of them as aggressively as they can, but the opportunities come gradually enough that they all seem to be a part of the natural order of things. That they are made possible by vast changes in technology and an encroaching and globalising world is not fully comprehended. Even the very recent introduction of cell phones to Tichurong, which has reduced the time needed to transmit a message to or from the United States from two months to two seconds, is already considered routine and unremarkable. Luddite that I am, I relied on *their* technological expertise to execute commands on *my* cellphone.

In the kinds of transformations I've been describing, people act as part of large-scale, systemic globalisation processes, whether they know it or not, just as in the *Bhagavad Gita* Arjuna finds himself impelled to fight, without knowing the larger context of the battles in which he fights. But sometimes an individual, by being the right person in the right place at the right time, gets caught up in unpredictable but dramatic life-changing ways. This was the case with the cantankerous old Dolpali who played the elderly village leader in the film *Caravan*. Since I ran into him several times in Dolpa, I could see that in the film he simply played himself, but bigger than life, magnified many times on the big screen. Once a village leader, he became known around the world for playing the same role he had been playing all along in Dolpa. The film is even more globalised and globalising, in that its director was a Frenchman and the film was eventually nominated for an Oscar in Hollywood.

Globalisation in the case of Tanka Prasad was also of an

obviously more individual type, and he too assumed the role of a star, although a political one. Tanka Prasad's initial encounter with globalisation followed his learning of English as a child and his subsequent discovery of the great liberal political tradition of the West, in the works of such thinkers as Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Marx, Lenin, Voltaire, Rousseau, Napoleon, H.G. Wells and Bernard Shaw. Their ideas excited his imagination beyond anything he had theretofore read of in Nepali language books available in the 1930s, or had heard about from his parents in his traditional Brahmanical household. These books transformed his perception of political realities in Nepal, and his life. Afterwards, as in the cases of the Sherpas and Dolpalis, there was no turning back.

As a consequence, instead of following in the footsteps of his father and pursuing the humdrum life of a mid-level civil servant under the Ranas, he chose the career of a political revolutionary, founding the first democratic political party in Nepal, which ultimately landed him a life-time jail sentence at the hands of the Ranas. Much as the Ranas would have liked to execute him, they just could not bring themselves to incur all the sin (*pap*) that, as devout Hindus, killing a Brahmin would entail. As consolation they had to satisfy themselves with executing his friends, the four martyrs.

After ten grim years in the Central Jail of Kathmandu Tanka Prasad was released when the Rana regime was finally overthrown, and he eventually became Prime Minister in 1955 in a democratic government—a position he had first learnt existed from his readings in English political history. As Prime Minister he had the rare opportunity to globalise his country in a spectacular and unprecedentedly literal way, by opening diplomatic relations with China, the Soviet Union, Japan, Egypt and Switzerland.

Thus, in varying ways these three examples show how globalisation works not only at the global economic level, but at the social, cultural, political and even personal levels too. It is a process in which neither regional state histories nor particularistic ethnographic identities go far enough because globalisation transcends them (Shneiderman 2010). Just as biology can tell us that leaves fall in the autumn, but

not exactly when any particular leaf will fall, globalisation cannot predict exactly which people will be mobilised and manoeuvred out of their comfort zones. But that does not gainsay it as a ubiquitous force which can be neither denied nor escaped.

All these cases assume the epistemological position that only insofar as one does things is it possible to know about things, but no one proceeds from a blank slate. Tanka Prasad's knowledge of western political philosophy preceded his own political activity, both of which formed a feedback loop that deepened his prior book knowledge. What matters, ultimately, is the ways in which globalisation can be grasped and turned to one's advantage rather than otherwise, whether individually, culturally, or nationally.

But the familiar and unavoidable macro/micro question which plagues all of social science remains: how does the unfathomably vast and impersonal force of globalisation become translated into the routines of quotidian events in Nepal? Compression of time and space is one thing; the rhythm of everyday life, with its 24-hour days and location at a specific longitude and latitude and altitude, is another. What is the mechanism by which individual human beings confront and manipulate the globalising changes they meet head on, or try to, whether they are aware of them or not?

The standard anthropological answer is that globalisation operates the same way any other such set of influences operates – i.e., culturally. Since human beings are primarily cultural beings, it should just be a matter of identifying the culture (which anthropologists are supposed to be good at), composed of sets of symbols and meanings which guide the behaviours of people sharing a common lifestyle. A conventional way to do that is to operationalise culture as a set of rules which constrain or encourage people to behave one way or another; they apply to any domain of life – marriage or religion or economy, for example.

Instances are not hard to find. There is a wide variety of marriage practices in Nepal. Some groups practice matrilineal cross-cousin marriage. Communal religious rituals are found in many places, sometimes in the form of a community religious system in which

households host annual feasts by turn. It is well known that division of labour may follow along class, caste, ethnic or gender lines. Defining culture by rules, or deriving it from them, has the advantage of being explicit; however, it also has the unintentional effect of construing individual human beings as cultural zombies, mindlessly following rules handed down to them, whereas in real life culture is not only structured but also restructured by actors over generations. Changes over these generations cannot be accounted for by a listing of rules for any one generation.

Furthermore, mere knowledge of rules is not necessarily the most critical tool to use in negotiating one's way through the obstacles that life puts in our way. This can be illustrated in various domains. One can easily imagine someone mastering all the official rules governing football matches yet still being an indifferent player. By contrast, what the great football player requires, much more than a knowledge of intricate rules, is a feel for the game, a sense he can get only by playing it. Thus, it is more true to life to say that people do not so much follow rules as improvise on the spot, not randomly but within boundaries which culture sets, according to the demands that they confront in the practice of whatever game of life they are playing. Such improvisation results in strategies which are, like the globalisation that helps generate them, unconscious.

In the case of the matrilineal cross-cousin marriage rule practised in Dolpa, what if the mother's brother's daughter is not the right age? Or, what if the mother's brother doesn't have a daughter? Or, worse still, what if the mother doesn't have a brother? Do these states of affairs preclude the possibility of marriage, because they violate beliefs in rules about how marriage should be executed? Of course not. What people do in these cases is improvise—they find a classificatory mother's brother if there isn't a real one, or an unrelated bride if there are no classificatory relatives available. If a rule is impossible to follow, because what one has to do to obey it is too difficult or impossible, one has to manipulate it or find a way around it, according to whatever opportunities present themselves—opportunities that are under the most stable conditions inexorably

changing, and certainly changing under the presence and pressure of globalisation.

Similarly, if a family's turn has come to host an annual village feast, as with the Sherpa case of celebrating the Dumje festival, and if they skip town, someone else will fill in, and whoever reneges on their obligation will eventually face the consequences. What one does or doesn't do becomes paramount, regardless of belief. Or, if only men do the ploughing, as in Dolpa (because ploughing causes pain to the bullock, which is a sin, and women and lamas should not commit sin), and if there are no men available in a particular household for ploughing, swaps with other households for other kinds of labour will be arranged. What is essential is that the ploughing be done, and it emphatically will be done, by devising and invoking new rules if it comes to that.

Among the Magars of Tichurong, as noted above, men do all the ploughing and trading, while women do most domestic chores and all the agricultural work except for ploughing. If a man lacks helpers on his trading trips, his wife might help out, if she doesn't have small children at home to care for. In the Sherpa case, Buddhist monks are generally celibate. But if they are not—and even reincarnate lamas sometimes stray—such an errant monk might leave the monastery and start a family. Sherpas recognise quite explicitly that monastic vows cannot always be kept. If they are not kept, they might regret it, but there is always wiggle room around them. The point is not that improvisation is preferred to following norms or rules as a rational strategy; the point is that in real life improvisation is the only thing that works.

Tanka Prasad's wife observed a traditional Brahmin diet—no tomatoes or onions or garlic, not to mention chicken or eggs. But when Tanka Prasad was serving his life prison term she began to meet wives of other imprisoned politicians, who not only observed more liberal diets, but who were also annoyed by her insistence that she cook her own food, so she said to herself: well, my husband is in jail and eating forbidden foods and enjoying new commensal rules, and I want to eat, too! She began thinking about examples of inter-

caste dining in the *Mahabharata* and also in the *Ramayana*, when Ram happily ate food prepared by a low-caste woman. Rewanta Kumari gradually realised there were alternative rules, seemingly at odds with those by which she had always lived but for which nonetheless a case could be made, about what she could or could not eat. She changed her diet accordingly.

Similarly, the Ranas outcasted Tanka Prasad in prison by shaving his head, including his *tupi*, or top knot. This was the most serious punishment they could give him short of execution, aside from life imprisonment. When Tanka Prasad was finally released from jail, his wife's family wanted to invite him for dinner, but according to caste rules could not do so because, being outcasted, Tanka Prasad was no longer a Brahmin. Even Rewanta Kumari was tainted by her association with him. But her family also had to face the reality that this commensal rule conflicted with the more general rule that it would be a violation of social logic and sheer human decency for them not to eat with their son-in-law, who had suffered so much for his country (and for which he was nicknamed the Living Martyr), just because of a caste rule which he had had no role in breaking. So they broke the dietary caste rule requiring commensal relations only with other Brahmins, and went ahead with their dinner date with Tanka Prasad.

A political example more relevant to today's conditions is Tanka Prasad's actions on behalf of what in those days were called, in English, Untouchables. As a political radical espousing social equality, he could not countenance the deprivation and prejudice against the low-ranked artisan castes stipulated in the *Muluki Ain*. In the early 1950s he, therefore, put his money where his mouth was and led a procession of Untouchables into Pashupatinath. This movement met with strong opposition, but he was unyielding and insisted that it had to be done. As a result, 50 years later the rules have changed, and no one thinks twice about Dalits going into temples. After this social and religious rebellion was over, he went to King Tribhuvan and told him he should appoint Untouchables to his cabinet. King Tribhuvan replied, half-humorously, that Tanka Prasad already represented the

Untouchables, so why was there a need of anyone else to do so?

Tanka Prasad did not view his actions as abandoning Hinduism, or even reforming it. Besides being a professed Hindu, reading the great epics, praying and performing occasional *puja*, he had little interest in the technical details of its philosophy or theology; he simply held a very different notion of what the human essentials of Hinduism required, usually expressed in terms of tolerance and hospitality. Whatever his notion of Hinduism was, it had no place for such blatant injustice as Untouchability.

By improvising in all these ways, doing whatever it is that they do, people assert their own agency and, little by little, create their own culture, which differs from that which they have inherited from their predecessors. We are not being hypocritical in improvising in this way, nor even inconsistent, just creative and adaptive. We should not forget Aldous Huxley's aphorism that the only completely consistent people are the dead.

If it were not the case that improvisation is unavoidable, cultures would never change, whereas they always do change, slowly in isolated traditional societies, rapidly in cases where globalisation is operating. All this is not to say that people never obey rules, or don't try to obey them, or wish they could obey them; nor is it to denigrate the role of ideology, which may be seen as an elaborate network of rules and sub-rules produced by an endless series of improvisations.

But it is to say that rules can be stretched or thrown out altogether, and new rules made for new games (as happens after revolutions), and new cultures created, and new individual behaviours fashioned, according to the needs of the time and place, by means of an implicit practical logic. People follow religious and social rules when they can, bending them as necessary when they need to, which results in new rules. Ideologies are always the final outcomes of these pressures, including the political ideologies swirling around us constantly, and which are both causes and effects of the political improvisations we constantly practise.

Everyone does this—it is not a matter of education, or literacy, or personality, or even culture. It is the way human beings live,

contesting the incoherent spots in their cultures, nibbling at the edges of them, pushing them in new directions where they can. It is the way we fashion and refashion, within historical limits, the structures that are so familiar to us, and which come to seem so natural that they become, as we say, part of our culture. Culture results from this connection between agency and structure, just as a river, carving new channels within its banks, is connected to the structural lake into which it flows before it is emptied by yet another river.

There are many forces at work in crafting the logic of practice, by which logic norms in society are executed or not, but certainly globalisation is one of these forces. It operates at many levels—economic, social, cultural, individual—and in many guises. And it comes from all directions—at us, from us, through us. It is everywhere—not just ‘out there’, floating somewhere in the economic stratosphere, but ‘in here’ too, inside our minds and hearts and the goals and ambitions (or ideologies, if you prefer) by which we live.

Anthropological views of human agency all too frequently and uncritically resemble that of the hero of Camus’ novel, *The Stranger*, who, at the end of the book, says that in the long run one gets used to anything. The reactions we have seen in the Sherpa villages of Khumbu, in the Kaike-speaking villages of Dolpa, and in the urban lives of middle-class, high-caste, left-leaning political activists and leaders, show how people do *not* get used to anything no matter what the circumstances. Instead, they react creatively and productively to move themselves and their cultures in novel and hitherto-unexplored directions.

Different groups, of which Nepal certainly has no shortage, find themselves in very different situations economically, socially, and so on, and therefore have different ideas about how to do this, which generates political opposition among the different groups. But they all follow a logic based on what they do as much as on what they believe. They do so under the influence of globalisation, the primary engine driving not just change, or dynamics, in the examples which I discussed during this lecture, but changing dynamics—the process by which change itself is changing.

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Mahesh Chandra Regmi
(1929-2003)

The Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture was instituted by the Social Science Baha in 2003 to acknowledge and honour historian Mahesh Chandra Regmi's contribution to the social sciences in Nepal.

The 2011 Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture was delivered by **James F. Fisher**. Prof Fisher was Professor of Anthropology and Asian Studies at Carleton College, Minnesota, where he taught for 38 years. His geographic interests lie in South Asia, and he has done fieldwork in Nepal on and off for almost 50 years on economics and ecology among Magars in Dolpa, education and tourism among Sherpas near Mount Everest, and he wrote a person-centred ethnography on Tanka Prasad Acharya, human rights activist and one-time prime minister of Nepal. As a visiting Fulbright Professor, he spent two years helping start a new Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Tribhuvan University, Nepal.

Prof Fisher's books include *Living Martyrs: Individuals and evolution in Nepal* (1997); *Sherpas: Reflections on Change in Himalayan Nepal* (1990), *Trans-Himalayan Traders: Economy, Society, and Culture in Northwest Nepal* (1986); *Himalayan Anthropology: the Indo-Tibetan Interface* (1978); and *Introductory Nepali* (1965).

