

## Research on Nepalis in Britain challenges the idea that we all have simple mono-religious identities



‘Are you Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist...?’ Surveys and censuses from India to the UK ask such questions, assuming that every citizen can tick a box indicating a simple, mono-religious (or non-religious) identity. Research on Nepalis in Britain and other parts of Europe undertaken between 2009 and 2012 by David Gellner and his team, funded by [Religion and Society](#), calls this assumption into question. To take one example from many, researchers visited a man who described himself as not religious though raised Hindu, displayed a line of mini Christmas trees on a dining room sideboard opposite his wife’s Hindu shrine, and a Christian cross next to a photograph of his deceased mother. He said that he had been baptised when visiting a church with friends in Japan, and his daughter was happy to consider herself part Hindu and part Christian. Such religious identities are not only complex and multiple, they also have a collective, family dimension as well as a purely individual one.

This is the first major research project to study the relatively small but fast-growing Nepali diaspora in Europe. In 2008 the Centre for Nepal Studies UK (CNSUK) estimates that there were 72,173 Nepalis in the UK. There are many ex-Gurkhas and their families, plus growing numbers of students, nurses, and other professionals. They have settled mainly in London, Manchester, Reading, and towns close to army bases (Ashford and Folkestone in Kent, Farnborough and Aldershot in Hampshire). The project considered all aspects and types of religion within the diaspora: public community events, family and individual practices within the home and elsewhere, and (hardest to access) resort to ritual/spiritual healers. Methods included a survey of 300 households, participant observation, formal and informal interviews in homes and at group events, and analysis of ritual and liturgical literature as well as of photographs of material objects and sacred texts.

Analysis is on-going, but the sheer variety and richness of religious and cultural practice is already apparent. Even team members who are experienced Nepali researchers based in Britain and deeply embedded in their own community were surprised. Nepal is not a populous country – 29 million people, close to 10% of whom live abroad – and yet the number of different religious and spiritual practices is exceptionally large, with new forms continuously emerging in the diaspora – and possibly also in the homeland. The findings call into question the accuracy of responses to survey questions that oblige individuals to identify with a single religion or none. Not only did many people struggle to fit themselves into these categories, other family members would often join in and offer alternative suggestions. Personal shrines displaying a plethora of objects and images drawn from many different religious and cultural traditions reinforced this finding. The successful campaign to bring in Buddhist lamas to serve as chaplains to British Gurkha regiments alongside Hindu Brahman pandits is an indication that diversity is starting to be institutionalised in more formal ways as well.

When the first census was administered in Nepal between 1952 and 1954, the categories ‘Buddhist’, ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ had to be taught to the census enumerators so that they might then be able to explain them to

respondents. This research suggests that Nepali religious practice continues to sit uneasily with these singular census categories, reminding us of the precariousness of such attempts to divide religious life into neatly bounded categories.

## Find out more...

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- Visit the project's web page: <http://www.isca.ox.ac.uk/research/social-anthropological-research/vernacularreligion/>
- Listen to Co-Investigator Sondra Hausner presenting the research at Programme findings conference 'Sacred Practices of Everyday Life' (May 2012, Edinburgh): [http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/spel\\_conference\\_sondra\\_hausner](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/publications/podcasts/show/spel_conference_sondra_hausner)
- Look up publications from the project: S.L. Hausner & D.N. Gellner 2012 'Category and Practice as Two Aspects of Religion: The Case of Nepalis in Britain' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80 (4): 1-27; D.N. Gellner & S.L. Hausner 2012. 'Religion' in K. Adhikari (ed.) *Nepalis in the United Kingdom: An Overview*, pp. 54-68. Reading: CNSUK; D.N. Gellner & S.L. Hausner forthcoming 2013. 'Multiple versus Unitary Belonging: How Nepalis in the UK deal with "Religion"' in A. Day (ed.) *Social Identities between the Sacred and the Secular*. Ashgate.

## You might also be interested in...

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- Visiting project partner Centre for Nepal Studies UK's website: <http://www.cnsuk.org.uk/>
- Findings from another Religion and Society project, focused upon shared shrine spaces in the Punjab: [http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research\\_findings/featured\\_findings/shrines\\_in\\_india\\_and\\_pakistan\\_demonstrate\\_shared\\_practices\\_of\\_sikhs\\_hindus\\_and\\_muslims](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/shrines_in_india_and_pakistan_demonstrate_shared_practices_of_sikhs_hindus_and_muslims)
- A Programme project investigating Hindu schools in South India: [http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research\\_findings/featured\\_findings/hindu\\_schools\\_in\\_south\\_india\\_are\\_more\\_interested\\_in\\_success\\_than\\_militancy](http://www.religionandsociety.org.uk/research_findings/featured_findings/hindu_schools_in_south_india_are_more_interested_in_success_than_militancy)

## Project Details

### Award Title

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**Vernacular Religion: Varieties of Religion in the Nepali Diaspora**

### Team

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Principal Investigator: Professor David Gellner (University of Oxford)

Co-Investigator: Dr Sondra Hausner (University of Oxford)



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council



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## Research Partners

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Centre for Nepal Studies UK

## University

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University of Oxford

## Award Type

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Phase 3 Large Grant

## Key terms

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Nepal, identity, census, Hindu, Buddhist, Gurkha, material religion