

Doing Business in South Asia: A Conversation by the Penn South Asia Center on behalf of Current Penn Undergraduates

Today we are talking with Dr. Pratyoush Onta, Research Director for the Kathmandu-based research and policy NGO Martin Chautari. After earning an MA in the Department of South Asia Studies he went on to obtain his PhD from the Department of History in the School of Arts & Sciences. He is a member of the class of 1996.

Thanks for making the time to chat. Can you tell us about your current work?

I currently work as an educator and academic in a non-university institutional setting in Kathmandu, Nepal. Officially my title is Research Director for Martin Chautari (MC), which is a research and policy institute that aims to produce high quality academic work on issues of democracy, media, and education as well as gender and social inclusion in Nepal. In the past I have held several other posts at MC, including as General Secretary and Director of Media Research. Actually my work with MC began when it was still an informal discussion group in the years after 1991. The organization would not take the name it did until 1995—when we were still an unofficial organization. The name refers to the late Norwegian scholar of Nepal Martin Hoftun, who was instrumental in the founding of the discussion group but who died tragically in an airplane accident in 1992. For the next six years after 1995 MC functioned still somewhat informally as a program of the Centre for Social Research and Development in Kathmandu, but in 2002 we registered as a separate non-governmental organization (NGO).

How does your role at the institute intersect with your education at Penn?

Well, I came to Penn originally in 1988 as a PhD candidate in the Economics Department. I came for graduate study to Penn from Brandeis University where I was an Economics major (with Mathematics minor), having gotten to the US originally from Kathmandu—where I grew up—for college in 1984. In Nepal I had studied pre-engineering so economics and math were natural choices for me to pursue at the BA level, especially since at Brandeis I found a new interest in the social science awakened. Had I not come to the US I probably would have gone on to university in India.

In any case, while going on for the PhD in economics also seemed like a natural choice, I was—soon after coming to Penn—confronted with the reality that, for better or worse, the discipline was not going to make it easy for me to pursue the vital questions about the real world that really underpinned my intellectual concerns. For methodological and other reasons, economics PhD programs at the time—and I believe now still in the US—tend to narrow one's research

horizons in a very particular way. And I quickly came to feel this as a constraint that I would not be able to function under. Fortunately for me, the fact that Penn had such an excellent tradition in area studies meant that from the Economics Department I was able to transition into a masters program in the South Asia Studies Department. During my Master's degree study, a couple of the faculty at Penn proved really critical in helping pave the way for the continued transition I found my new course work helping me to make, which was in the direction of the History Department. There was, first, the economic historian Professor Alan Heston, who worked on India, and, second, the historian of South Asia, the late Carol Breckenridge, who at the time was, I believe, based in the Anthropology Museum. Carol, in particular, urged me to talk to David Ludden in the History Department—who specialized in South India—about applying to the PhD program there. And I did end up doing so. In the end, therefore, my connection to Penn found me moving from the Economics Department to my MA in South Asia Studies in 1991 to a PhD in History, which I completed in 1996. In the History Department my primary adviser was David, though I also worked closely with the historian of Africa Professor Lee Cassanelli as well as Carol and the anthropologist Peter van der Veer.

So MC, as a research institute, entered into your career at Penn during its last phase when you were working on the PhD in history?

Yes. I had first come back to Nepal in 1992 just after entering the PhD program in History and in order to begin my research. It was at that time that I connected with those who had started the informal discussion group that would become MC. I eventually had made my way back to Philadelphia to concentrate on writing my dissertation, which focused on the history of Nepali Nationalism. As I was closer to completion, I went back to Nepal in 1995 to finish the writing, finding that by then many of the original members of the MC discussion circle had departed. Therefore, at the time I then became its de facto coordinator. And having made the decision that I wanted to come back to Nepal and devote my life's work to questions of democracy and development here, it was a role that I knew was important. There were a number of transitions for MC that were yet to be made. As I mentioned, we initially found some more solid footing under the Centre for Research and Development's banner, but it would still be a few years after my full return to Nepal before we could establish ourselves as a separate NGO, which happened in 2002. Before that, I was in a coordinator's role when MC was still a project of the Centre. After we became our own NGO in 2002, I took on the title of Director of Media Research, and I have remained with the organization ever since.

What is your day-to-day work like now at MC?

Well, I would say that there are two levels at which I work. First, there is a lot to

do to sustain the institute financially. So I do spend a good deal of time on trying to raise money and general support so we can survive and thrive. As a result, I also end up doing quite a bit of networking, both within and outside of Nepal. This first role also necessarily includes all the activity that goes into our efforts to elaborate MC's evolving priority areas and agenda. On that front, we are doing not only research but research training, running a publications operation and public library (we have been putting out a journal called *Studies in Nepali History and Society* since 1996, for example), and trying generally to improve the quality of public discourse in Nepal on our core areas of intellectual concern pertaining to democracy, civil liberties, social justice, and development. The second aspect to my day-to-day work involves trying to find time for my own specific research and writing projects for MC, which in one way or another relate to the same above themes.

Stepping back I would situate both these aspects of my work in the larger context of higher education in Nepal more generally. In the country, there has been enormous growth in higher education in the last 25-30 years. We now have nine functioning universities, and in terms of gender equity the number of women enrolled in the universities is almost equal to men. However, the quality of higher education leaves a lot to be desired. There is just too little public money going to support research in Nepal's universities. And in contrast to a place like India, which is now experiencing a huge boom in private funding for higher education, we simply don't have the equivalent sources to support research coming from our own corporate and philanthropic sectors. To the extent that the private sector is involved in higher education in Nepal, it comes through the ongoing attachment of new colleges to the universities. So while we have a significant underlying and even expanding infrastructure there is not necessarily a system for quality control. The various colleges attached to the universities are, in a sense, running their own shows in terms of the content they teach, arriving at their own fee structures in financing themselves, and so on. Some may be doing their own self-monitoring, whether effective or not, but there is no overarching supervisory role by the government to guarantee a certain performance level.

Considered against this whole backdrop, MC's work is about being demonstrative of what a certain standard of excellence in academic research and policy thought can be. And because especially in a society like Nepal's, it can be very easy to start institutions but much harder to make them really functional, both practically- and intellectually-speaking, ensuring that MC succeeds at doing both, is what my (and all of my colleagues') day-to-day work is really most fundamentally about.

In light of this what you have just told us about your work at MC, how does it make you look back on your years at Penn? What now appears most memorable to you about that time?

As I have suggested in my earlier answers, as I moved from Economics to South Asia Studies I also entered a phase of discovery. It allowed me to take classes in anthropology and history that I still very much remember today. Most of all, however, that first transition exposed me to a new universe of students in the South Asia Studies Department who became my peers. Most were studying India so they exposed me not only to a different country perspective from that with which I was most familiar, but they also created a general milieu that really pushed me to formulate my thinking about Nepal and its history in new ways.

My experience at Penn was, in these ways, absolutely crucial to helping me frame the type of research I wanted to do and that I continue to do in my individual capacity at MC. Likewise, to the same extent, it was also critical in my own input into the larger efforts all of us at MC were originally undertaking together and that we are now still undertaking to frame our collective purpose and work output.

What about regrets?

Well in my case the answer is perhaps obvious in the very nature of my somewhat winding path at Penn. As things turned out, it would have been just as well for me to have not started in the Economics Department. I suppose by way of elaborating on the question in order to be more helpful to students facing their own decisions about advanced study, I would say that it is important to be aware about what discipline best suits you. For me, it turned out to be a better choice to pursue a way of study that would allow me to engage with real world economies, histories and societies instead of the highly formalized models I encountered in the classes on micro, macro and economic theory that I did while in the Economics Department.

Outside of my own specific experience, however, I would also say that I do think it is to be regretted that an institution of Penn's caliber still had as much room as it then did, and I suspect still does, to diversify its courses and faculty so as to allow students to more fully engage with the diversity of the societies and national cultures comprising South Asia. Even if its area studies or other faculty who focus on the region do not in the near future grow to include Nepal-specific expertise, there is a lot that could still be done to broaden the curriculum to better incorporate seemingly more peripheral parts of South Asia. Perhaps more systematic efforts at having visiting faculty from a place like Nepal would be the most obvious or easiest first step.

Do you have any parting advice you can offer to current Penn students who might be interested in living or working in Nepal?

Obviously I'm biased by the type of work I do here. But, I would still say that I

think it is important to get a broad background in contemporary politics, sociology and history—not only as relating to Nepal but also as relating to the region to which it belongs more generally. Only by having such a perspective can you really appreciate all the ways Nepal is both of the region but also different and particular. In this first respect, I would also emphasize that students should never underestimate the treasure that is Penn’s library system. Even though there was no faculty member when I was at the University who specifically studied Nepal, along with everything else the library had to offer it hosted a treasure trove of materials on the country that simply had never been used.

Second, I can share some thoughts rooted in what I’ve learned from my own work. Much of the challenge we face at MC is in building up an institution that is functional in a landscape full of institutions that cannot be described as particularly effective. Don’t get me wrong: the number of university researchers in Nepal has grown tremendously in the past twenty years. However, the quality of the output in scientific, social scientific, and liberal arts research—as well as policy analysis—continues to vary greatly, often leaving much to be desired. So in a way our overall goal at MC is to show others both inside and outside of Nepal that that world-class work can be done here.

That second point, then, is meant to speak to how we are a country that both needs and welcomes those who have an interest in what is happening here. I, myself, am devoted to building MC into a great institution and part of that is to necessarily do what we can to welcome those who are interested in our own work. But I would equally hope that current students see that there are other institutions here in Nepal—in both the private and public sectors—that they might gain from interning with, working for, or even simply doing some kind of study abroad with. At US universities such opportunities have definitely existed in the past. For a long time the University of Wisconsin had a semester abroad program here, which unfortunately ended due to the period of civil conflict we went through between 1996 and 2006. Cornell still has a program, even though it has become smaller than it was in past years. But so do many others. Hopefully, Penn will some day join that list. I have taught in the Nepali university system and have also helped to forge connections to universities in the US, UK and Japan myself. So I know first-hand how much of a *need and thirst* there is for continuing such partnerships.

What about the role of entrepreneurship in forging these partnerships or otherwise working in Nepal? Do you have any last words for students who might want to engage with Nepal in this latter sense?

Well, I would just remind them that the term “entrepreneurship” can have many meanings. While it is not one that necessarily comes first to my own lips, I’d say students should see that in a country where so many institutions are in stages of

relative infancy, there is also a relative abundance of opportunity for creativity. And isn't that what entrepreneurship is supposed to be all about?