

## **My Research Experience**

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What is research, what are the features of a good quality research? Research is search for knowledge. The objectives of research may be pure knowledge building, investigating issues for policy making purposes, for advocacy and action for social change. The scope of research is very wide it can focus on physical or social phenomenon. Social science itself is a vast area. My experience has been in the social science, particularly socio-economic. I am an economist by profession but have learnt to negotiate in other social disciplines to some extent. First and foremost I am an activist in the social movement for freedom, democracy, human rights and women's rights. My research is guided by my activism. But at the same I want to understand well the issues before I advocate them. This requires intensive research and knowledge building and a capability to negotiate in the theoretical universe and to translate or reject them in praxis.

The first thing in your research is choice of the subject. It depends very much on what you want to do with the results of your research. I am a researcher as well as an activist. My research, all along has been for a purpose, for serving the people. Originally I intended to study science to serve the people. But in the school years, the teaching of mathematics was very poor. Our teacher in optional math emphasised rote learning so much that, he said we should put the Geometry book on our head and hammer it in. Then I left optional math and took Sankrit very late towards the end of 10<sup>th</sup> class. When I had to choose subject for my intermediate I was 17 years old. I choose economics and civics, with the same objectives of serving the people best. My life and research has been guided all along with this objective.

When I passed with my Masters degree Economic Cybernetics with distinctions in Moscow State University in 1966, I was offered scholarship to stay and do my Ph. D.; but I refused and came back to Nepal even if I was married to a Russian and had a daughter from him. They came to Nepal with me. My answer was that I want learn more about my country, before I go for further study. In Nepal, I was offered a job in NPC, but joined Research Department of Nepal Rasra Bank with the same hunger for knowledge about this country's economy. This continuous desire, which pervades all my activities and choices, gives me unlimited energy and strength to work hard for finding something new to contribute in each of my work, I undertake.

It was not easy to get into economic research in Nepal for a woman. The first obstacle I encountered was travelling. I was the first woman Officer in NRB. In addition I had joined directly as second class officer. I had very little knowledge about the Nepalese Economy, as I was educated in the Soviet Union in Russian. The next gap was I had lost touch with English for six years of my education there. I had to work hard to fill up these gaps. I think I did reasonably well in the NRB exams. But, in the beginning, my colleagues thought that I could join in the second class position because of my father's

influence not by my capacity, although I was highly qualified. To disprove this was the first challenge to me. And I did prove up to the challenge very soon.

The first test came very soon. In the beginning, I headed the division of Public Finance in the Research Department. This Division had to prepare an economic survey and write a pre-budget advisory report for the Finance Ministry and NRB on monetary policy. At that time MoF had no research capacity and the economic survey was carried out and written primarily by NRB. CBS did not produce GDP estimates. So I decided to go on an economic survey mission to major cities of Terai. There was no East-west highway. One had to travel on make-shift Kachhi roads in old jeeps with spade and pick with you or take Indian Railways. Until that time, NRB had never sent any woman staff outside Kathmandu. It became news and the authorities were not willing to send me. Then I argued that if you deny me opportunity to study this country's economy, how can I write a good report and compete with the male colleagues. How am I to develop my capabilities and career? The authorities relented. But the trouble was no male colleague was ready to travel with me. With much persuasion, an older junior officer agreed to travel.

But that was only half the battle won. At home my father said that how can I travel alone with a man? What will people say? Then I lied that we will pick up another woman staff from Birganj and we started the travel. On the journey, we had to sleep in all kind of places, office tables, bed-bug-infested "charpai" at Katarnia Ghat in India across Gularia. I survived and completed the travel from Kathmandu to Mahendra Nagar and back in 20 days. In Nepalganj, I met my cousin brother, who found out that I was travelling with my male colleague alone. On my return my father noted that I had lied to him. I responded yes, but I needed to travel for enrichment of my knowledge about this country and my career development. He did not say any thing. After this no comments were made on my travelling plans.

We brought information about the estimated agricultural and industrial production and trade perspectives from agricultural offices, knowledgeable people and factories. Another team had gone to the east. We together brought out adequate information for estimating GDP, assessing market situation, trade developments etc. We wrote a flying report. Next year I went to the east and so on. The taboo of not sending women on missions was broken in NRB.

Research is hard work. First you have to digest and master the theory. Secondly you have to read what the other practicing have to say about that. Thirdly you have to relate that to your own context and experience. This requires much time, labour, dedication and courage.

Lessons I have learnt on research methodology from my long research life include:

First, social science theory without practical relevance in is meaningless. It gets value only when it is enriched by praxis. All social science research must relate to practice and try to explain the social phenomena and human behaviour. My research findings guide

my activism. I undertake, multiple consultancies with donors, but each consultancy provides me insight in the subject. With that knowledge I have contributed to issues of National development, by writing, teaching and participating in various movements. My activism, on the other hand has provided relevance to my research. The connection between theory and practice is close.

Secondly, for social research, limitation to one discipline is a constraint. Human personality is multi dimensional, one interacting with other and abstracting from these relationships makes the research findings imperfect and some times impractical. This is very evident in economic research. We start from an assumption that "other things remaining the same". For example market solutions are judged best for achieving social welfare, on the assumption that every one has equal level of assets and access to information. I think for social research, one must learn the Marxist theory of dialectical materialism, because it makes several important points. Particularly Dialectical Materialism expounds that (1) every thing is changing; (2) society develops in interaction of material and ideological<sup>1</sup>, (3) that there is a difference between the substance and form of each social phenomena, and (4) all social phenomenon are intrinsically related.

Third, the research must be conducted with open mind without any preconceived conclusions. To me, open mind also means starting with no hypotheses. We may start with a vague idea of what we may find, but formulation of hypothesis before the actual research, already means limiting our vision and scope of information we collect.

However, we must be ready to do extensive literature review, of both theoretical literature and applied research findings made by others. Reading alone is not adequate one must digest them and agree or disagree with the conclusions. If one does not disagree, then she/he must think what new you can contribute to further add to the previous research. If one disagrees then, he/she must collect adequate information to refute the previous conclusions on the subject. Research can and must use both primary and secondary information. There is no point collecting already available information once again. Some time research may be about interpreting the available information in new ways. For example Census, NLSS, NLFS, NFHS in Nepal are rich sources of information which can be used to do research in multiple subjects. The same information may be analysed in different ways, depending on your purpose of analysis.

Ensuring good quality research? In social science, for a good quality research it must be contextual and relevant to the society. It must be based on acceptable methodology for generalisation. You may proceed from particular to general or general to particular. It must contribute some thing new to the subject of research. It could be methodological or subject specific contribution. The topic you want to research must be innovative, but at the same time relevant to the burning issues at hand. There needs to a balance. Often, I

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<sup>1</sup> Although dominance of material over the ideological in the long run is a fundamental tenet of Marxism, the interactive force of ideological over the material is not denied. It is evident even in the main proposition of the Marxism that proletariat has to be prepared ideologically to overthrow the capitalist production system.

have seen many people getting into research topic, because it a fad. This is not advisable. It will be more difficult to find new things to say. Because of this also, extensive literature review is a must, even before you decide on a topic.

Some research works are like base line surveys. When there is no information on the subject one chooses to investigate, then the investigation it self becomes the research. I think our study on Status of Women, undertaken during the late seventies, whose results came out in a series of publications between 1979 and 1982, was just such survey.

We did develop new multidimensional methodology to study women's status. Particularly, collection of time use linked to the household production data enabled us to measure not only the work time of men and women but also to link them to production and income generated by each activity. By these calculations we were able to show that women and girls not only worked more hours then men and boys, but also contributed more to the household income. Further it also showed that Nepali agriculture depended to a large extent on women's work, which led to policies to provide agricultural training to women. The notion that women did not work was busted with evidence of more than enough information. New instruments to measure household decision making information were developed and used to collect authentic mass of information on the decision making process in the household. This enables us to investigate differing patterns of cultural behaviour towards women in the Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan groups. I doubt if we had gone to the field with preconceived ideas, then we would have been able to collect such rich information base.

Our research team was multi disciplinary which included economists, anthropologists and sociologists. While we the economists learned to use qualitative methods of analysis, the anthropologists and sociologists learned to use the quantitative methods. We combined quantitative and qualitative methods in our study. We used case studies of 8 villages to examine the community and women's lives in various cultural groups of Nepal while using quantities method to generate adequate sample information on time use and household production. I think use of both methods is a must for a good quality social research. Quantitative data can not be meaningfully interpreted without contextualising them to specific social situation. For example marriage in Neal means different thing to women in Nepal than in USA. Firstly, in Nepal "girls are married off". In USA "women marry". In Nepal women have to leave their parental home and go to live with in-laws. In USA the couple will make a new household or may live either in husband's household or the wife's household. There is no compulsion.

In addition to adopting proper methodologies for study, one must find proper indicators to measure the phenomena you want to measure. For example increase in female literacy rate is a positive piece of information, but this does not say any thing about whether gender disparity in educational access is increasing or decreasing. To find out about this we must also analyse rate of increase in male literacy. Only if the female literacy rate is increasing faster than the male literacy rate, gender disparity in educational access will have declined. While number of women with graduate and above education has increased much between 1991 and 2008, number of women with such education per 100 men with such education has declined. Similar will be the issues with income or wage comparisons;

both female and male wages have increased in real terms between 1995/96 and 2003/4 (NLSS, 2004), but the ratio of female wage to male wage has declined. Particularly for gender analysis, male\ female comparisons are a must. Just studying women's situation is not adequate. The point is that indicators you are using to make your statements must be supporting your findings.

One more point, I want to bring in is, for all social research and particularly for economics, a rudimentary knowledge of statistics is must. My mathematical education has proved very handy for me in all my research. It enables one to understand what the various pieces of simple statistics say. I have found use of statistics without knowing exactly what it means, most annoying.

Finally, one more point that needs attention is not being afraid to say what you find, whether it confirms to the conventional wisdom or not? It is not important whether your conclusions are accepted immediately or not, but you must believe in your findings and your findings be supported by concrete evidence. People do not believe immediately in non-conventional opinions. It does not matter. If your findings are true they would be recognized in the long run. I can bring you many examples on this even for Nepal. For example already in 1995, IIDS after an extensive study of rural delivery system came out with a conclusion that community management of schools and health posts was the only way to improve the school management . But it took 10 years for the government and the donor community to accept that recommendation. I have been saying already since early eighties that Nepal's employment problem is related to low education and skills of the labor force rather than surplus labour par se and that training programs did not cater to the really needy. But policy makers and donors were not convinced. Only now this fact has been recognised and a plan for skill training to those who need is being formulated.

In conclusion a good a quality of research must be innovative in the ideas and recommendations, made with conviction and adequate information to support them, and relevant to burning issues at hand.