Interview with Kesar Lall

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This short contribution is based on a much longer interview with Kesar Lall conducted by Mark Turin on Wednesday, 11 July, 2001. Recorded at Kesar Lall's residence at Sallaghari, Bansbari, Kathmandu, Nepal, the full two-hour interview was transcribed by Nirdesh and Sandesh Tuladhar, and subsequently edited by Hannah Turin and Claire Wheeler. The interviewer and interviewee remain grateful to all those who have assisted with the process over the years. This short article continues *EBHR*'s established tradition of publishing interviews with scholars and public intellectuals from the Himalayan region.

Much has changed in Nepal in the decade since Kesar Lall was interviewed on videotape in 2001, not least politically. Although often remarkably prescient, sections of the conversation that related to contemporary political events at the time of recording (the royal massacre and the Maoists' response, for example) have been edited out to avoid anachronistic references to past events. In this synopsis, the focus is rather on Kesar Lall's enduring intellectual and literary contributions.

Born in Kathmandu in 1927, Kesar Lall (Shrestha) is one of Nepal's best-known folklorists and most widely published writers. Using English as his primary medium, he has over 50 books of stories and translations to his name, alongside significant collections of poetry and journalism in Nepali, Newari (Nepal Bhasa) as well as English. In 2004, Corneille Jest, Tej Ratna Kansakar and Mark Turin edited a privately published volume on the occasion of Kesar Lall's *Buraa Janko* (Kathmandu: Marina Paper, ISBN 99933-890-7-2, 104 pages) that can be downloaded for free as a PDF from here <http://bit.ly/KesarLall>.

In the excerpts that follow below, interviewer questions are indicated by 'MT' and interviewee responses by 'KL'.

MT: I have noticed that you don't use the name Shrestha very often in your writings. Can you explain why?

KL: I started out by using an Indian sounding name, Ashok Paul, because Ashok is a pleasant name and Paul sounded Indian. That was in the period

1945 to 1950, when I was writing for the Indian papers. I like names of just two words: Ruskin Bond, Bernard Shaw. So I started to write just Kesar Lall. It wasn't a rejection of my caste or of the name Shrestha—simply that in those days, people didn't have to use their last names, their caste names, unless they were writing a legal document or an application. Everyone was just known by their first name.

MT: How did you settle on the pen name Ashok Paul?
KL: I thought that I needed an Indian-sounding name so that I would not draw the attention of the police. It was dangerous to write at that time. Many people were interned for writing in Nepali, such as the poet Chittadhar. He was in jail for seven years simply on account of his writing, although he had nothing to do with politics.

Before 1950, I only published in India. Even there I had an unpleasant experience when my first book came out in 1962. I think I spent about Rs. 4,000 on that book. For the second printing, I sent some Nepali rice paper, but I never had any response from the printing press in Nagpur. I contacted some students and one of them wrote to tell me that the police in Nagpur had seized all the books, paper and everything, and had told the printer to do no more printing. In total, I lost about Rs. 1,000 worth of Nepalese paper.

MT: How did you start working with B.P. Koirala?
KL: In 1951, soon after the revolution, B.P. Koirala, who was then Home Minister and already a household name, was looking for someone to work for him. A friend of my father asked my father whether he should look into getting me a job. I ended up working for B.P. as a typist for about eight months.

When Koirala was out of office, I had to find another job. I had a friend who worked in *USAID*, which was called *USOM* then, the United States Operations Mission. This was in 1955. So I went there, and was accepted because I had a good recommendation from the former Prime Minister. I was a Senior Clerk (General) in the office of the Director. My job was 'to compose communications, translate and interpret in Nepali for the Director, type, file and perform any other duties as may be from time to time assigned'. In a year or so, the Director recommended to Delhi that I be promoted.

MT: Were you able to travel during this time?
KL: Yes, King Tribhuvan was so kind as to send a Nepalese delegation to

Japan. I was helping the monk Amritananda, who spoke no English. He asked me to help him with English, translating, interpreting and publishing a booklet on Nepal and Buddhism. It was a good opportunity for me to see Japan, otherwise I would never have got there. I was there as a member of an official delegation for about two weeks, and then after that I visited some places. My impression was that the Japanese are very hard working. They are like Newars in many ways, even in the sound of their language, and they are very polite. Of course, I knew a little about Japan already, since my father's guru had been to Japan and had a great admiration for the Japanese, so I didn't feel as if I was in a strange land when in Japan. One evening I was in a temple, and I walked out into the garden and heard some people reciting their prayers. It was not in Sanskrit, it was in Japanese, but I felt that it was just like listening to *sutras* here in Nepal.

MT: An early source of employment for you, and an important step in your career, was working at the American Embassy. How did that start?
KL: When the American Embassy in India was opened in Kathmandu in August 1959, the First Secretary came to open it, a man by the name of Mr. Heck. Thinking that the Embassy might be a better place to work than USAID, I asked whether I might come and work for him. I was transferred from USAID to the Embassy in 1959, a couple of months after the opening, and worked there until 1985—a total of 30 years of service for the American government.

MT: Can you talk a little about the different tasks that you had in the Embassy?
KL: When the Embassy started, the first thing they wanted me to do was to issue visas and passports. I received some training—someone came from Delhi to instruct me—and I learned to use the Consular Services. Then they thought I would be more useful somewhere else, in the Political and Commercial Office, so I continued to work there and became the Political Specialist. My work was mostly reading the Nepali newspapers and preparing translations, and then arranging for people from the Embassy to meet various officials in government. I would arrange such meetings by appointment and often accompany them, or when they wanted to go outside of Kathmandu, I would go with them. On occasion, I dealt with commercial information and details for and from Washington. I often found myself interpreting for people, counselling, helping them with their domestic problems too, with their staff, and

translating legal documents, for example, purchases of property.

MT: Were your colleagues at the American Embassy supportive of your literary interests and efforts?

KL: Oh yes, and while I was at USAID, the women's organisation there used to have a little magazine called *Mountain Peeks*, to which I contributed once in a while about some local festival or other.

My work at the Embassy—translating newspapers, stories and articles—gave me a lot of practice in writing English. It pleased me that when I showed some of my writing to my first boss, the Vice Consul in the Consular Office, he remarked that my English was much influenced by my reading of newspapers, which was true. And then he and his wife helped me a little bit with editing, making corrections to my English and suggesting things, and assisted with getting my first book published.

MT: A great deal of your career has involved language and translation. May I ask how you learned English?

KL: I learned a little bit from my father and after that, I continued on my own. I kept on reading newspapers and books, learning all the time. When I was about three years old, I remember speaking in English for the first time. At that time, a Chinese monk and his assistant had come to Kathmandu, and they appeared in our courtyard. My father asked me to say, 'Please come up,' so I said, 'Please come up!' The monk smiled and came up. These were the first words of English that I had ever spoken. I knew nothing about him, not even that he was accompanying the abbot of a temple in Peking as his interpreter. Many years later, in 1995, my wife and I were in Lumbini for a visit. There, we saw a visitors' book in which I found Chinese characters translated into English by the same man I had spoken to. Since I like to write about such things, I wrote a story entitled *A Little-Known Chinese Pilgrim*.

MT: Have you always written in English?

KL: Yes, but I also wrote a series of articles about Japan in Newari in the period 1953-1954. And I wrote a small piece for *Gorkhapatra* (in Nepali). Later on, in 1965, I wrote a story about my visit to Gosainkund for a Nepali magazine. After that, I wrote a couple of stories in English and a friend translated them into Nepali and published them. But this is the limit of my writing in other languages.

MT: How did you end up feeling so comfortable speaking and writing in English?
KL: I don't know, but it just feels natural. But I am still learning all the time, and there are specific things that I have learned from different people. When Edmund Hillary was here, the Prime Minister asked me to prepare a draft letter to him, so I began with, 'My dear Sir Hillary.' Mr. Koirala said, 'No, in English it should be Sir Edmund.' These are the little things that I remember, and they do matter. I would use my dictionary every day, it was always with me.

I like to write as simply as I can. I write about my travels, treks, and I learned a great deal by writing for the daily newspaper, *The Motherland*. Precisely because they said to me that they would publish whatever I wrote, unedited and as it was, I became very careful of how and what I write.

MT: Did your family help to shape your interest in language and literature?
KL: I have heard that my grandfather was interested in drama and that he used to organise little plays, but he died too young for my father to know much about it. My father was helped by his teacher, Jagat Sunder Malla, who taught him English and helped him on his way in life. Jagat Sunder Malla's brother, Padma Sunder Malla, translated *Aesop's Fables*— the first ever book published in Newari in Kathmandu, in Nepal Sambat 1035 (1915 AD).

MT: What gave you the impetus to start your career as a writer?
KL: My mother and grandmother used to tell me stories around the winter fire. I was inspired to write them down in an attempt to learn to write. From the very beginning, when I started reading my first book in English, I was never satisfied with what was written. I always wanted to change a noun or alter the tense of a verb to make it my own. I just love to write.

MT: When I read Nepal Off The Beaten Path*, I was interested that many of the metaphors you used and much of the imagery is very American oriented—you mention Hollywood, motels, Robert Frost—do you have any thoughts about that?*
KL: I have always been very influenced by what I have read, Irving, Kipling, of course, Sherlock Holmes, all these old books. This may have something to do with my choices. And I read the *Reader's Digest* and *National Geographic*. For the last 20 years, Ruskin Bond has been my guru. I wish that I could write like him. I see my writing as basically influenced by the way that he writes, and I told Ruskin Bond this. His writing is so simple, it comes

from the heart. And his sympathy with the people of India, that's the most important thing, I think, the way that you actually view people. Empathy. He is on the same wavelength as the poorest villager in India.

MT: Please tell me a little bit more about Ruskin Bond and about your relationship with him?
KL: Well I found a little piece of his in a newspaper about a little boy whom he found trying to sleep in a little corner of a bazaar in Mussoorie. He was walking back home late at night and this boy was shivering and he had nothing but a cotton shawl. And he asked this boy, 'Would you come with me? I can give you a shelter.' So he took him home and let him stay with him for some while. Then he wrote about a boy called Prem Singh, someone who came to work for him. He wrote about Prem Singh, his wife and his children so often and so much that I almost got to know the family. When I went to see him in 1995, there was a little girl with him. He said to me, 'The girl's mother has gone out. Otherwise, I could have given you some tea. So I will give you a glass of water instead.' He fetched a glass of water for me. I asked him, 'Is this Prem Singh's daughter?' He said, 'No this is Prem Singh's grand daughter.' So he wrote little things about a little boy and the place where he stopped for tea. He has a very humane way of describing people, animals, and flowers in a kindly and humorous manner. I very much like the way he writes.

MT: Does your documentation of folk literature ever have a political dimension?
KL: No, not at all. My first collection consisted of stories told by my mother and grandmother, and stories that I had heard from friends. Story telling was very common in those days. Whenever I went on a trek, I would ask people for stories. Sometimes I would succeed, sometimes I wouldn't. I found that one good way to encourage people to share their stories was to tell my own stories, Japanese stories, Newar stories, whatever. Gradually while I was talking to them and telling them my stories, they would remember their own stories and start telling me.

Sometimes you hear conflicting versions of the same story. For example, there is the story of the Indian juggler, which I collected in Kathmandu, and then I found the same story in Sankhu but there the man from Sankhu was the victor. Later on I learned of the same story in Patan with a different ending, with the Patan man claiming victory. In this way, there are

interesting variations of the same story, from a Tibetan or a Chinese source for example.

MT: Do you ever record the stories on tape?
KL: I tried that in Helambu, but people were more interested in talking to the tape recorder and then hearing themselves afterwards than in the storytelling itself, so I don't do that. Instead, I listen to them and make notes—if I can, I write down the whole story. Sometimes the stories are quite simple, but others can be very involved and much more complicated. There was one story I recorded in Bigu, Dolakha district, from a Sherpa man, that simply went on and on, from nine in the evening until midnight. I didn't get anything out of that. Sometimes, if it's necessary, I can go back to check the details afterwards.

MT: Is it a struggle to provide adequate context when translating oral history?
KL: I have problems translating stories from Newari. Writers have a habit of muddling up the order and tenses, so sometimes I have to do quite a lot of editing, or cut something down to explain it in a better way. Translating from Newari is really difficult, whereas I find translating from Nepali to be easier.

MT: Do you ever offer people payment for the stories that they have told you?
KL: No, never. One way to avoid payment is to share stories, I tell one and then they tell one. Sometimes I offer some food or *raksi*, which can help the stories to come out. Alcohol can help loosen the tongue, after all.

MT: When collecting such folk tales, do you think of yourself as a field anthropologist?
KL: I have learned from anthropologists that it is better never to say that something is wrong, because what is wrong here will very probably be quite right somewhere else. For example, in one African society, if a man murders someone, the murderer has to pay back the widow by living with her until he has given her a child. Well, from my perspective, this is amazing, and of course it couldn't happen here in Nepal. It simply wouldn't be acceptable. That's something that I learned from anthropology.

MT: When will your work be done?
KL: I'm thinking in about two years' time [circa 2003]. At what we call *buraa*

janko. When a Newar man reaches 77 years, 7 months, 7 days, 7 hours, and 7 minutes, there is a ceremony to recognize that he is really old. So at least I must work very hard, if I can, until I am 77.

MT: Could I ask you to read a poem? This poem links to your feelings on anthropology and not judging another's way of life as being wrong.
KL: I wrote *A Tragic Tale* about Bernei, a Peace core Volunteer in the 1st group in 1962. He was my houseguest for a few days when he came for a reunion 30 years later. He told me about the following experience. He was in the wrong place and with the wrong people, teaching in a school. The teacher with whom he worked was very polite and treated him with respect. One day Bernei told him about his humble craft and the teacher was quite shocked, so to say. From then on, Bernei was looked down upon and treated with scant respect. I was very sorry to hear this. So I thought what would have happened if he had been teaching in a place where craftsmen, particularly those who work in wood, are appreciated and honoured. In such a situation, the craftsmen would have been happy and would have respected him.

A Tragic Tale

Bernei has the skills I wish I had.
He could turn a tree into a table
Better still, take a piece of wood
And make it a work of art
That would have earned him the admiration
In this kingdom of intricate carvings
In pillars, doors and windows
In the dwellings of both gods and men;
But best still, he could lend his eyes
And his hands to those who need
The skill to make a useful thing or two.
Bernei went to teach in the Tarai instead
At two and twenty. He stayed to learn
A lesson vastly different from what he knew.
From a friend he made,
Also a teacher, whom he took for a kindred soul,

But who boasted an ancestry rooted deep in scriptures.
When Bernei told the teacher he came from a stock
Who worked with his hands not the head,
Thunderstruck, he said to Bernei
Not in so many words but in different ways
That he who works with his hands
Is lower in the human scale than he
Who works with his head.
And for ever there is a world apart
Between the head and the hand
As between a master and a slave.
Bernei's efforts to teach in the Tarai
Were efforts made in vain, and he returned
With a heavy heart, but wiser in the ways of men.