

June 2017

The Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal & the Himalaya

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Recommended Citation

Sarkar, Swatahsiddha and Khawas, Babika (2017) "The Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal & the Himalaya," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 37 : No. 1 , Article 22.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol37/iss1/22>



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Conference Reports

The Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal & the Himalaya

Lazimpat, Nepal

27–29 July 2016

The fifth Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya took place on 27–29 July 2016 at the Hotel Shankar in Lazimpat, Kathmandu, Nepal. Organized by the Social Science Baha (SSB) in association with the Britain-Nepal Academic Council (BNAC), Centre for Himalayan Studies (CNRS), Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS), and Nepal Academic Network (NAN, Japan), the conference brought together more than eighty eminent scholars, researchers, activists, and media persons from Europe, the United States, Australia, Canada, Japan, India, and Nepal for three days of presentations, discussions, and debates. Presentations focused on pressing concerns for Nepal and the Himalayan region, such as language, literature, the nation and nationalism, disaster, development, political movements and conflict, Nepal's new constitution, migration, remittance and recruitment, health care and mental health, and gender. The conference opened with brief introductory remarks by Nirmal Man Tuladhar (SSB) and Katsuo Nawa (NAN, Japan).

There were four papers on the theme of language, literature,

the nation, and nationalism presented in two separate panels. Ajapa Sharma (Jawaharlal Nehru University) spoke on the conflation of nation and gender in the works of three legendary literary figures of Nepal: Bal Krishna Sama, Laxmi Prasad Devkota and B.P. Koirala. Balam Upreti (St. Joseph's College, Darjeeling) examined the patriarchal historiography of the nation and its subsequent contestations and problematization using the folk corpus of Nepali *Teej* songs. Lokranjan Parajuly (Martin Chautari) offered critical reflections on the intersection of caste, class, gender, nation, and revolution as evinced in the writings of Muktinath Timsina's realist revolutionary social stories. Shifting the focus to language and folk literature in the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya, Swatahsiddha Sarkar (North Bengal University) analyzed the link between language and the politics of belonging, and their evolution in the region.

A third panel focused on migration studies and the effects of migration on different sectors of Nepal. In the first presentation, Bandana Sijapati, Sambriddhi Kharel, and Anish Bhandari from the SSB, Nepal discussed the rural to urban internal migration resulting from urbanization processes. Their findings suggested that the urbanization-led construction industry was largely filled by migrant workers; such processes of internal migration might be a

strategy to provide crucial means for rural livelihood in the form of internal remittance to the migrants' families. In the second presentation, Ang Sanu Lama and her team from the SSB drew on fieldwork in three districts of Nepal to highlight the effect of migration on male members of the local community that effectively secured women's role in local forest governance through Community Forest Users Groups. Neha Chowdhary (independent researcher) with Bandita Sijapati and Jeevan Baniya from the SSB discussed the migration abroad of Nepali health professionals to highlight patterns of outmigration and its consequences on Nepal's already identified shortage of health workers. Rashmi Upadhyay's (NEHU, Shillong) ethnographic account of Nepali migrant workers in the coalmines of Meghalaya, India focused on return migration and emphasized the predicament of being a migrant in a foreign land. Ramji Prasad Adhikari and Rishikesh Pandey (Pokhara University) made a presentation on the significance of gender analysis in migration research. Studying women who migrated to Gulf countries from the Pokhara valley, they highlighted the livelihood contribution of Nepali women labor migrants and assessed the exploitation involved in the migration process. While women labor migration to Gulf countries is considered to be a matter of pride, especially in view of their remittance contributions, migrant women have

to face a lot of personal sufferings and constraints that neither the family/community nor even the state policies ever acknowledge. Noah Coburn (Bennington College) and Dawa Tshering Sherpa's (independent researcher) presentation focused on the impact of British Army recruitment in the socio-economic life of young Nepalis. They showed how the craze for enlistment among Nepali youth still looms large while the recruitment in British Army is in decline.

There were several papers that highlighted social issues and concerns regarding Nepal's post disaster predicament and environmental concerns. Leah James (University of Colorado), Courtney W. Mitchell (University of Denver), Shree Niwas Khanal (Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, Nepal), and Alexander James (The State University of New York at Binghamton) presented on NGO involvement in addressing mental health issues of disaster-affected (2015 Nepal earthquakes) Nepalese, focusing specifically on their successful use of culturally adapted interventions. Andrew Haxby (University of Michigan) focused on the problems and paradoxes of transparency in Nepal's reconstruction programs after the 2015 earthquakes. Jessica DiCarlo and Katie Epstein from University of California, Berkeley and Bikash Adhikari (Forest Action, Nepal) studied the transition of labor in the disaster affected areas where farmers are shifting to market-oriented crop production like cardamom. They noted the prospects of the transition from a subsistence level agrarian economy towards a market oriented cash crop economy. Such a transition necessitates greater economic solvency on the part of the rural communities that they

predict may eventually lead to the creation of rural inequality. Claire Martinus (UMONS-ESHS), Dawa Tshering Sherpa, and Soni Khanal (both independent researchers) discussed the life of the urban masses after the 2015 earthquakes. Sherpa and Khanal presented narratives of street children's everyday lives as the backdrop of the disaster following the 2015 earthquakes, while Martinus discussed the appropriation of public space in Kathmandu after the earthquakes. Rishikesh Pandey's (Pokhara University) presentation focused on the contemporary environmental concerns in the Trans-Himalayan region and the adaptation of the local people to the changing climatic conditions leading to a complex dynamics between humans and the environment.

One panel was dedicated to the application of social science research methods in mental health research and practice in Nepal. A group of eleven researchers who conducted their research in various places in Nepal showed the ways of dealing with mental health care across the country in three presentations. These papers examined the problems and prospects of mental health from the experiences of different communities of Nepal. Another presentation by Ruja Pokhrel and the team from Nepal's Transcultural Psychosocial Organization discussed the mental health system across Nepal from the perspective of policy formulation and governance and made recommendations for further improvements in this regard. Another two presentations painted a general picture of health and the health care system vis-à-vis the state of Nepal in which Gaurav Lamichhane (University of Heidelberg) emphasized the problems traditional practitioners

of Tibetan medicine in Nepal face due to the state's non-recognition for traditional health care practices. He emphasized the need for state intervention in creating a space to modernize Tibetan medicine, given its potential foreign clientele and the benefits for its stakeholders. Shiva Raj Adhikari's (Tribhuvan University) presentation focused on health care financing to show how the process called out-of-pocket and the extravagant cost of health care in Nepal adversely impacts the quality of life among the poor and leads to further impoverishment.

A group of scholars from Nepal's universities and abroad presented on the theme of development in relation to global funding agencies in Nepal. Kalyan Bhandari (University of Scotland) drew attention to the question of international development agencies and their role in Nepal's tourism policy. Kapil Dahal (Tribhuvan University), Ian Harper (Edinburg University), Sushil Baral (Health Research and Social Development) and Rekha Khatri (independent researcher) presented on how the outcome-based approach as adopted by a global agency (GFATM) has influenced the engagement of the different institutional entities in areas of health sector development in Nepal. Their findings showed how this outcome-based achievement-oriented approach led the stakeholders of Nepal's health sector to become target-oriented instead of meeting the broader concerns of health in a country like Nepal. Radha Adhikari (Edinburg University) and Obindra Bahadur Chand (SSB) scrutinized the efficacy of institutional organization and foreign aid in implementing maternal and child health care projects in Nepal. Thakur Prasad Bhatta (Kathmandu University)

discussed issues surrounding local self governance and decentralized planning at the district level in contemporary Nepal. Manoj Suji's (SSB) ethnographic account of local institutions and development experience as mediated through common property resources explored the ways through which community managed micro-hydro can be viewed as a political process.

Several presentations directly highlighted gender in various social arrangements, including health, education, movement and labor. Susan Clarke (New South Wales University) critiqued the 'structural violence' approach in ascertaining the women's position in society and argued that certain methodological approaches cause researchers to miss out on the lived experiences of their research participants. Alba Castellsague (Autonomous University of Barcelona, UAB) investigated the production and reproduction of gender regimes in schools in the rural belt of Himalayan Nepal. They situated schooling—the symbol of development—as an intersectional field of education, work, and gender. They argued that schooling is a space of negotiation for emancipatory practices yet it also creates new forms of power relations that impede the transformation of existing hierarchies. Neha Chaudhary's (independent researcher) work uniquely focused on the wives of Gurkha soldiers in the United Kingdom and the question of their integration to the host society. Studied from the wives' perspectives, her presentation called forth the need for reconsidering methodological approach in looking at the vastness and disparity in the experiences of their research participants. Two other papers focused on the women of Darjeeling and Sikkim. Kumar

Chhetri (University of North Bengal) discussed the gender dimension of the Gorkhaland movement in the Darjeeling hills, while Babika Khawas (University of North Bengal) focused on the women workers of Darjeeling's and Sikkim's tea plantations. Both presentations demonstrated that despite women's significant presence and contributions to the tea economy as workers and to the Gorkhaland movement as fierce agitators, the hill space still remains gendered and patriarchal.

Politics was a dominant theme throughout the conference. Sujeet Karn (SSB) philosophized death in relation to the Maoist People's Movement and argued that the Hindu notion of death as an ideology—'martyrology'—was politically constructed and used in the Maoist People's Movement. Krista Billingsley (University of Tennessee) talked about the impact of the Maoist movement upon children and the question of transnational justice. Mahendra Lawoti (Western Michigan University) interrogated the democratic and participatory nature of the new constitution making process in Nepal, and persuasively showed how the election of the members of Constitution Assembly systematically isolated the *janjatis* from the process of constitution making. Sanjaya Mahato (Polish Academic of Sciences, IFiSPAN) in his quantitative paper assessed the political competency of women in Nepal in matters of electoral politics even though they were handicapped by several socio-economic inadequacies. B. R. Whitmarsh's (University of London) paper dealt with the potentiality of a *Gantantra Smarak* (Republic Memorial) as a political site to commemorate the foundation of 'New Nepal.' Jeevan R Sharma's (University of

Edinburg) presentation examined how the human rights organizations document, screen, and monitor the cases of torture and ill treatment in detention centers or prisons, in addition to other cases ranging from individual acts of violence to a legal claim. Treating the ill treatment documentation as a 'category of practice' rather than a category of analysis, Sharma raised a formidable critique against the way international human rights organizations turn an incident into a case under the terms of Nepal's 1996 Torture Compensation Act (TCA) and how in the process a large number of experiences of torture and ill treatment in Nepal are never documented as they do not fit into the process maintained by the human rights organizations. Nar Bahadur Saud (Tribhuvan University) also engaged issues of human rights' violations in his ethnography of playback theatre, which he demonstrated has played a major role in effecting social harmony and peaceful coexistence in contemporary Nepal. Tracing out the evolution of caste representation in Nepal's body polity since the 1950s, Kanako Nakagawa (Kyoto University) showed the identity politics of the Khadgi Newar caste through the formation of networks in the meat market with Muslims. Tek Bahadur Dong (Tribhuvan University) deconstructed the political myth that regards the Dashain festival as a political project of the *janajatis*. Discounting the dominant views of Susan Hangen and others, Dong applied Pierre Bourdieu's analytical framework to show how the Buddhist Tamangs in Kavre have indigenized Dashain and how the festival actually objectifies their social structure principally through the network of kinship and cultural worldview akin to the notion of *habitus*.

A few papers/sessions focused on issues that did not fit the themes elaborated above. Swatahsiddha Sarkar's and Babika Khawas' presentation, for example, discussed the state of Nepal studies in Indian sociology/anthropology. There was also an interactive session with the editors/representatives of four leading academic journals on Nepal studies published from Nepal, the US, and Europe: Pratyoush Onta (Editor, *SINHAS*), Man Bahadur Khattri (Editor, *Dhaulgiri Journal of Sociology & Anthropology*), Michael Hutt (Contributing Editor, *EBHR*) and Heather Hindman (who represented *HIMALAYA*). This session was beneficial for both young and senior scholars working on Nepal and the Himalayas.

There was also a panel centered on the official release of Richard Burghart's posthumous publication of *The History of Janakpur: A Study of Asceticism and the Hindu Polity* (Mandala Book Point, 2016). Dr. Ram Baran Yadav, the first President of Nepal who himself is from Janakpur, released the book as the chief guest. Martin Gaenzle (University of Vienna), who edited and introduced Burghart's book, was unfortunately absent, though his note for the occasion was read *in absentia*. Hutt was among the speakers who commented further on the time that he shared with Burghart, thereby making the evening's gathering an emotionally charged one. Speakers like Dr. Ramawatar Yadav (former Vice-chancellor, Purbanchal University) and Jacob Rink (Yale University) offered critical comments on the book's academic content and methodological insights and the use of notations for transliteration of local terms. Deepak Thapa, Director of the SSB, also shared his long journey working with the manuscript

and the justification for his decision to not tamper with the originality of Burghart's *magnum opus*.

The three-day academic gathering was expectedly engaging. All the sessions were heavily attended and elicited productive debates that contributed toward ongoing academic discussions surrounding the study of and research conducted in Nepal and the Himalaya.

Swatahsiddha Sarkar and
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Annual Conference on South Asia

Madison, WI

20–23 October 2016

The 45th Annual Conference on South Asia was held at the Madison Concourse Hotel, October 20–23 in Madison, WI. There were 750 registered participants, 10 exhibitors, 12 preconferences, 156 panels, and 6 association meetings. The conference theme this year was Decay, inviting papers and panels that explore destruction and its consequences for life afterwards.

The Joseph W. Elder Keynote Lecture, “Perpetually on the Cusp of Crisis: Women, Peace, and Security in the South Asian Region” was presented by Radhika Coomaraswamy on Friday evening. Coomaraswamy is former UN Under Secretary General and Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict (2006–2012) and UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women (1994–2003). Her address analyzed the current state of women, peace, and security in the South Asian region, drawing on her field consultations.

Coomaraswamy asked, “How do issues of ‘voluntariness and consent,’ ‘responsibility to protect,’ ‘protection of civilians,’ ‘counterterrorism,’ and ‘empowerment of human rights defenders,’ among other global norms, play out in the South Asian region? What has been our response and is there an alternative to assimilation or defiance?”

This report covers selected panels and papers focusing on Nepal and the Himalayan region included in the main conference, beginning with the Himalayan Policy Research Conference. Organized as a preconference event, the Himalayan Policy Research Conference consisted of four sessions with a total of 27 papers. The four sessions focused on “Development Issues,” “Education, Health and Social Safety Nets,” “Geopolitical Conflicts and Human Rights,” and “Agro-forestry, Energy and Environmental Issues.” These sessions brought together papers covering issues of conflict, human rights, refugees, well-being, climate change, agriculture, and sustainability in Himalayan countries.

During the main conference, the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal and their aftermath were the focus of several presentations. A panel titled “City Mandala, City Decay: The Use of Historical Narratives in Post-Quake Kathmandu” brought field reports by panelists Drew Haxby (University of Michigan) and Andrew Nelson (University of North Texas) from post-quake Kathmandu. This panel asked, “In light of the earthquakes of 2015, which damaged many of the city's architectural achievements, how might a re-reading of Kathmandu's history illuminate the city's prospects for the future?” Nelson shared his observations from the Newar locality of Khokhana in his paper “Building