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Annual Conference on South Asia

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Annual Conference on South Asia

Madison, WI

26–28 October 2017

The 46th Annual Conference on South Asia, organized by the Center for South Asia at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was a great success. The conference brought together over 800 registered participants, 150 panels, 18 preconferences, 8 association meetings, 4 film screenings, a dance performance, and a keynote address by Professor Ayesha Jalal (Tufts University). Forgoing a conference theme this year, the organizers allowed panels a greater degree of flexibility in content and topic. The conference also dispensed with the dreaded Sunday morning timeslots, concluding the conference after a full day of lively panels on Saturday.

Thursday's schedule was composed entirely of preconferences, which afforded participants the intimacy

of a small conference setting, while allowing for more sustained attention to specific themes. Three preconferences explicitly focused on aspects of Himalayan studies, while two others included numerous papers addressing themes of interest to this journal's readers. The Colonial and Postcolonial Borderlands preconference brought together scholars working on various aspects of frontier and border formation in modern South Asia. Geographically, these papers ranged across the Himalaya, from Ladakh to Chittagong and from India into Tibet and China. The conference organizers, historians Swati Chawla (University of Virginia) and Aniket De (Harvard University), arranged panels chronologically in order to better address the transformations in meanings and varieties of "frontiers" and "borders" across time and space in South Asia. The preconference concluded with an engaging roundtable discussion, led by Ayesha Jalal, on the question of whether "borderlands" was a useful category of historical analysis.

The Himalayan Policy Research preconference, organized by Soumi Roy Chowdhury (University of New Mexico), covered a range of contemporary policy issues across the Himalaya. These included panels on investment and regional co-operation, migration and development, gender, identity and institutional development, and agriculture and sustainable development. A preconference entitled Futures of Northeast Indian Studies, organized by Yasmin Saikia (Arizona State University) and Amit Rahul Baishya (University of Oklahoma), tackled questions of methodology, materiality, environment, and gender across the northeastern states of India. It concluded with a roundtable discussion on building a community

of scholars that included Professors Sanjib Baruah (Bard College), Willem van Schendel (University of Amsterdam), Bengt Karlsson (Stockholm University), and Yasmin Saikia (Arizona State University). Finally, a preconference on 'Gender, Sexuality and Occupation,' organized by Ather Zia (University of Northern Colorado), Deepti Misri (University of Colorado, Boulder), Haley Duschinski (Ohio University), Hafsa Kanjwal (Lafayette College), and Mona Bhan (DePauw University), included a wide range of scholars working on Kashmir and northeast India and addressed questions of sovereignty, occupation, and activism with regard to gender and sexuality.

The regular conference began on Friday and continued until a plenary session on Saturday evening. Several themes of particular interest to readers of this journal spanned the 150 panels held over these two days.

Numerous scholars presented on the subject of women and labor across the Himalaya. Lauren Leve (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) and Debarti Sen (Kennesaw State University) both presented on a panel on women's enterprises and the state. Leve focused on Maoist women in Christian churches, and gendering religion, conflict and the state of Nepal, while Sen discussed women's labor and generational dynamics in Gorkhaland I and II. Sarah Shepherd-Manandhar (University of Illinois, Chicago) discussed strategies for resolving the discord between gender and class expectations in Kathmandu. Laxmi Dhungel examined the experience of migrant women in Nepal in a paper entitled "A Journey of Learning: Critical Analysis of Migration Experience Among Educational Returnee Women of Nepal."

Two papers during the regular conference focused on environmental aspects of Himalayan studies. Sarah Besky (Brown University) explored the relationship between environmental change, industrialization, and tea consumption in the early twentieth century, while Suchismita Das (University of Chicago) examined trees, tourism and the politics of recognition in Sikkim.

The relationship between art and religion was foregrounded in a paper by Frederick Smith (University of Iowa) entitled "Deities in the Annual Mukhya-Gangotri Procession and Their Links with Wider Mahabharatas Culture in the Indian Himalaya." Ross Bernhaut (University of Pennsylvania) detailed the fascination of Nicholas Roerich in his paper "A Russian Yogi in the Himalayas?" Jan van Alphen examined the relationship between nature, gods and myths in Indian and Nepalese art.

Perhaps the largest thematic areas covered by Himalaya scholars at the conference concerned the relationship between borders and identity, borders and mobility, or immobility. Swati Chawla (University of Virginia) presented a paper entitled "Sikkim in the Age of Nation States, 1950-1975"; Dannah Dennis (University of Virginia) discussed policing the border by policing women's bodies, which focused on gender, anti-India sentiment, and Nepal's citizenship laws; and Aditi Saraf (Johns Hopkins University) detailed the relations between credit, conflict and counterinsurgency in Kashmir. In terms of migration, mobility, and immobility, Ina Zharkevich (Oxford University) presented a paper entitled "Maoist Revolutionaries, Christian Converts,

and Irregular Migrants: Hopelessness, Temporality, and 'Existential Mobility' in Rural Nepal." Richard Bownas (University of Northern Colorado) examined the experience of Dalit workers and urban migration in central Nepal. As mentioned earlier, Laxmi Dhungel's paper explored the experience of migration among returnee women in Nepal.

In a similar vein, an entire panel was dedicated on Saturday to the theme 'Aspiration, Mobility and Materiality in Uttarakhand.' This included Radhika Govindrajan's (University of Washington, Seattle) paper on duplicity, sociality, and mobility in an Indian village election; Rachel Goodman's (University of Wisconsin-Madison) paper on the changing aspirations and (im) mobilities among young women in Kumaon, India; and Bhoomika Joshi (Yale University) presented a paper entitled "Transport, Mobility and Possibility in Uttarakhand."

Finally, Rakesh Bhatt (University of Illinois) discussed accusative objects in Kashmiri on a panel on South Asian syntax in honor of Alice Davison and James W. Gair.

On Friday evening, Ayesha Jalal gave the Joseph W. Elder keynote address, entitled "Faultlines of Freedom." Jalal encouraged to audience to question the historical logics used to shape the political boundaries of modern South Asia. In particular, she reminded of her provocative argument from her path-breaking *The Sole Spokesman*, which asserted that religious difference had far less to do with Partition than is often assumed. South Asian studies, she insisted, must resist the political borders imposed on it by the contemporary world.

The 46th Annual Conference on South Asia was a lively and varied reflection of the healthy state of South Asian studies, and of Himalayan studies in particular.

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