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## Translating Tradition, Creating Culture: A Reconstruction of the History and Development of the Svasthani Vrata Katha of Nepal

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## TRANSLATING TRADITION, CREATING CULTURE: A RECONSTRUCTION OF THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SVASTHANI VRATA KATHA OF NEPAL

My Ph.D. dissertation reconstructs the sociocultural history and development of the *Svasthanī Vrata Katha*, a key textual tradition indigenous to and current only among Nepali-speaking communities. Many of Nepal's religious textual traditions have faded over time in importance, while others have never left the realm of pundits and priests. The *Svasthanī*, in contrast, has an unbroken history that spans the last five centuries and is still today one of Nepal's most widely celebrated textual traditions. According to Charles Hallisey, "If the survival of any particular text is not self-explanatory, but in fact it is normally the case that texts fade in their significance as social change occurs, then we need to discover how these texts that do endure are maintained" (Hallisey 1995). I explore the reasons for and conditions under which the *Svasthanī* remains so central to Nepali religious identity by tracing its textual evolution and by performing ethnographic field research to address the contemporary understandings and practices of this living tradition. The development of *Svasthanī* tradition offers responses to the question that Nepal's diverse geographical, political, social, and religious history raises: what does it mean to be a Nepali who is Hindu and a Hindu who is Nepali?

Funded by a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship, I conducted my dissertation research in Nepal between December 2004 and March 2006. This project has two parts that are interconnected in theory and method, one textual, the other ethnographic. The first contextualizes the *Svasthanī* as a discrete piece of an important literary tradition in Nepal and then focuses on the analysis and interpretation of the text. The bulk of my work involved extensive archival research at the National Archives (NA) and Asa Saphu Kuthi (ASK). I began by identifying and examining the oldest extant language manuscripts of the *Svasthanī* tradition, namely, Sanskrit (1573 CE), Newar (1603 CE), and Nepali (1810 CE). These three texts in particular are important benchmarks for the translation of the *Svasthanī* into and between different languages and the cultures of these linguistic groups. In consultation with Sanskrit and Newar scholars, I read closely and produced preliminary translations of the oldest extant *Svasthanī* manuscripts. I

continue to work on a translation of the oldest extant Nepali language *Svasthanī* manuscript.

I then expanded my inquiry with a broad survey of the NA's and ASK's archival holdings that house over seven hundred *Svasthanī* manuscripts, which involved a preliminary reading of dozens of manuscripts from different time periods and in the three languages of the *Svasthanī* tradition. I subsequently limited my research to examining in depth approximately five *Svasthanī* texts per century (i.e., from the oldest extant manuscript of 1573 CE through the present). I selected these texts to highlight cultural, political, and socio-religious differences reflected by the choice of language employed, the time period of composition, and the narrative content and detail included or omitted. I have since identified many of the most significant moments of textual evolution in the *Svasthanī*, though continue to trace more subtle instances of change and development. I want to understand, for example, not only *when* but *why* and to what affect numerous well-known narratives from the Vedas and puranas were incorporated into the text.

In addition to unearthing the history of the text's evolution, I am also interested in the dynamics of the *Svasthanī*'s narrative contents, as individual narratives and as a comprehensive whole. I inventory and analyze dominant themes and relationships in the *Svasthanī*, including the following: puranic narratives recast in the new context of the *Svasthanī*; the incorporation of local legend within these puranic narratives; gendered relations between gods and goddesses, deities and humans, and men and women; acts of devotion and sinfulness; caste and/or ethnic relations, particularly between high-caste Hindus and Newars, the two groups most often associated with the *Svasthanī*.

These textual inquiries require further research into the historical, sociopolitical environment operating concurrently with the *Svasthanī*'s narrative content and textual developments. A sociocultural reconstruction of the text's evolution requires isolating notable influences prevalent towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and also during periods of surging popularity of the *Svasthanī*. Such factors include political developments (e.g., contending forces and power struggles in

pre-unified Nepal and later in the unified kingdom), social issues (e.g., social conditions of women, castes, etc.), and religious influences (e.g., the presence and degree of influence of Vaishnavite, Shaivite, Tantric, and Buddhist traditions). This aspect of my study draws largely on historical accounts of Nepal, gathered in both archival research and secondary reading of Nepal's history.

The second component of my project moves from a text-archival focus to a contemporary ethnographic account of Nepalis' understanding and celebration of the Svasthani. In Magh (January-February) 2005 and 2006, I lived in the village of Sankhu, which hosts the annual month-long Svasthani mela. In addition to witnessing the colorful Svasthani barta (ritual fast), I interviewed numerous barta participants, pilgrims, and village elders to better understand Nepalis' lived experiences and celebration of the Svasthani tradition. These individuals offered keen insights on the unparalleled popularity and presence of the Svasthani textual tradition throughout its history and in today's society. For, according to many, the Svasthani is 'Nepal's most important living tradition'. I supplemented these interviews with extensive conversations with authors of recent Svasthani publications. Their insights in particular illuminated recent trends and hint of the future trajectory of this key tradition. I also digitally photographed

nearly twenty private copies of handwritten Svasthani texts owned by local (primarily Sankhu) families, including a text dating to 1674 CE that was haphazardly stored under a bed.

In my dissertation I argue that Hindu communities in Nepal translated the SVK tradition among and between themselves in an effort to conceptualize and create their own *Nepali* Hindu cultural identity and tradition. The Svasthani presents a unique viewfinder through which I reexamine Nepal's sociocultural history in an effort to understand how that history (re)produced this key textual tradition and, moreover, how this textual tradition can illuminate critical points of transition and development in that history. The importance of understanding this identity, the popular tradition that fostered it, and the implications of both for the future of what was until recently the world's 'only Hindu kingdom' is crucial as Nepal negotiates its precarious state of political transition and probable secularization.

Preliminary remarks on my research of the Svasthani's earliest textual incarnations will be published in the forthcoming volume of the *Journal of the Nepal Research Center*.

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## THE HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF LAND-USE AND LAND-COVER CHANGE IN LAMJUNG, NEPAL

Among land change scientists, there is growing recognition of the need for an integrative, multilevel approach to study the relationships of agricultural "modification activities" and global land-use and land-cover change (LULCC). This comes as a crucial step to move beyond the primary area of change (i.e., conversion of forests to other land-use categories) to study the changes in agricultural areas, mainly the land-use strategies resulting in different agricultural intensification levels. While these modification activities have significant impact on LULCC, these are also subtle and dynamic to be detected with remote sensing and ecological models alone. In other words, we lack sufficient knowledge on the extent to which agricultural land-use strategies contribute to LULCC and *vice versa*. The need for such knowledge is even greater for the mountain areas, one of the most understudied fragile ecosystems, where agricultural practices heavily rely on forests, livestock, pastures and cultural-ecological

adaptations.

In 2004-05, I conducted my dissertation research in Lamjung District, Nepal. This research proposes a cross-disciplinary, multi-scalar approach that integrates household and community data with remote sensing and GIS applications to investigate the relationships between the finer scale agricultural land-use strategies and the broader scale land-cover change trajectories for the period between 1984 through 2004. Main research questions were: Under what household and community contexts do mountain smallholders change their agricultural land-use strategies? How and to what degree are land-use strategies associated with the broader patterns of land-cover? After participant observations, a household survey of 66 households in two villages were followed by in-depth interviews of key respondents, elicitation of local land-use history, collection of "training samples," and remote sensing analysis to study the LULCC trajectories. Final data