



HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 29
Number 1 *The Tarai: History, Society,
Environment No. 1 & 2*

Article 26

2010

Obituary for Saubhagya Shah

Mahendra Lawoti
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya>

Recommended Citation

Lawoti, Mahendra. 2010. Obituary for Saubhagya Shah. *HIMALAYA* 29(1).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol29/iss1/26>

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the DigitalCommons@Macalester College at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact scholarpub@macalester.edu.



African Studies. But this is not to say that during his role as a college administrator in the U.S., he had forgotten Nepal. On the contrary, Dr. Gaige, together with John Scholtz and Leo Rose, had returned to Nepal to observe the historic 1991 elections, and these scholars had published a short article on the elections in *Asian Survey*.

At the time I met him, Dr. Gaige was undergoing treatment for cancer, and had moved from his home in Pennsylvania to a small apartment in Brooklyn to be closer to his family, particularly his grandchildren. As a Nepali, I was struck by the fondness with which he remembered Nepal and his Nepali colleagues, his research participants, and his peers from the U.S. with whom he had worked during those days. During our conversation, Dr. Gaige, in a wistful tone that I cannot forget, mentioned that the one thing he would like to do before departing this world was to visit his research site and meet with the people and families with whom he had worked in the sixties in the course of his fieldwork. With hopeful plans that his health would one day allow him to return to Nepal, he had stocked his small apartment in Brooklyn with notes from his research in the late 1960s.

Dr. Gaige had also been following the news of Nepal through the internet, but not very surprisingly, his understanding of the current situation was quite limited. He continued to refer to the *janjati* as the “hill people” and the *Madhesi* as “plains people.” Unaware of the migration of Nepalis to distant places, including New York, he, to my amusement, excitedly told me about how he had found out that the driver of the taxi he was taking to visit his doctor one day was Nepali.

After giving him a brief update about the current situation, especially with regards to the *Madhes* over Christmas cookies that his wife had baked, I began to tell Dr. Gaige about the importance of his work. He was amused when told that there are only a few people in Nepal who own a copy of his book; the rest of us have been violating copyright laws and making photocopies.

Undoubtedly, he was surprised, and I am sure pleased as well, to learn that his book was still so highly regarded. But then, like many of us, he was also deeply saddened to know that the situation in the Tarai was not much different since the time of his research in the late 1960s.

When asked why he had decided to work on the Tarai, Dr. Gaige told me that when he had initially broached the topic, it did not strike a chord with many people, including his own advisors, whose vision of Nepal was that of an archetypical hill and mountainous country. Such misinformation, he told me, was one of the reasons he decided to not only conduct research on the Tarai but also to “write a dissertation that would serve as an advocacy piece for the people of the Tarai.”

Dr. Gaige’s death means the loss of a scholar who was able to discern the plight of the people in the Tarai while the state and many of us Nepalis remained oblivious of the discrimination and exclusion experienced by nearly 40 percent of our compatriots. This is a tribute to Dr. Gaige but also a reminder that little has changed in the Tarai since he worked there four decades ago. We certainly have a long way to go, but unfortunately, have also lost a most sincere sympathizer of the Tarai and its people.

Bandita Sijapati completed her Ph.D. from the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, NY, and is currently serving as an Adjunct Professor at the Nepa School of Social Sciences and Humanities in Kathmandu, Nepal. Among her research interests are civil and ethnic conflicts, including the ongoing tensions in the Tarai region.

SAUBHAGYA SHAH 1961-2009

By MAHENDRA LAWOTI

Saubhagya Shah was a very decent human being and a close personal friend, and his passing came as a great shock. As an anthropologist, he was making his mark in the field of Nepal Studies, and at the time of his death (by cardiac arrest), was working on transforming his Ph.D. thesis into a book. Saubhagya was a year senior to me in school but I only came to know him well much later. When I returned to Kathmandu after completing a degree in architectural engineering in 1990, I began to hear about him. He had topped his class at Tribhuvan University while obtaining a Master’s degree in Sociology (for which he had done interesting research on sex workers) and had published a couple of very well read articles in Himal on the challenges the post 1990 hill Hindu state was facing from the aspirations of its multitude of ethnic and caste groups and from the spread of Christianity. I became personally close to Saubhagya in the nineties, but he was an intensely private person who rarely shared personal things even with his close friends and family members. Only after his death did I learn, like many of his other close friends, that he had had heart attacks a couple of times before.

Saubhagya and I began our graduate studies in the US in 1995 under scholarships provided by the US government. He was already regarded as a promising social scientist, while I did not know at the time that I would be venturing soon into the heady world of the social sciences from engineering. Saubhagya, who was on the faculty of the Central Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Tribhuvan University at the time of his death, and Program Coordinator of TU’s Department of Conflict, Peace and Development Studies, was very popular among his students. He was an excellent teacher and he provided his students with work in his research projects as well. As a testament of his students’ admiration and gratitude towards him, they organized several condolence meetings in his memory.

Saubhagya’s strengths as a scholar lay in his ability to synthesize a large body of relevant literature to make his arguments, while furnishing his papers with evocative titles (a talent based perhaps on his earlier work as a journalist). Saubhagya worked painstakingly and meticulously on his projects, a devotion to detail that was both a strength and perhaps a limitation. It was a strength because he produced well researched and well argued scholarly essays even when the themes he was dealing with were challenging. The flipside was that he only produced a limited number of them.

After he completed his Ph.D. in 2004 from Harvard and before his death, he published two important peer reviewed works in prestigious international venues. This was remarkable because the pull of social and family obligations, professional duties and the need to supplement income as a consultant has prevented many other promising Nepal based academics from going through the rigor of producing peer reviewed and quality publications. I was fortunate to be associated with his East-West Center publication as the principle researcher of the Nepal study group of the Internal Conflicts and State-building Challenges in Asia research project. He was the only one to complete a monograph from half a dozen or so commis-

sioned from Nepal based scholars. This showed his commitment to scholarly practice, as he must surely have foregone income he could have made through consulting for donor agencies.

Saubhagya wrote his dissertation on the participation by rural women in a transnational development project, but for reasons that are not clear, he did not appear to appreciate social movements of other disadvantaged groups. His article in *American Ethnologist* ("Revolution and reaction in the Himalayas: cultural resistance and the Maoist 'new regime' in western Nepal", *American Ethnologist*, 2008, vol. 35, no. 3) dealt with the resistance towards the Maoists in western Nepal. It is a very important work that analyzes probably the most sustained resistance toward the Maoist rebellion, but as a study of a rare event it may not be generalizable and its practical implications are limited, as shown by the eventual political success of the Maoists. The East-West Center monograph (*Civil Society in Uncivil Places: Soft State and Regime Change in Nepal*, 2008) is an important work that demonstrates the shortcomings of civil society in Nepal but it failed to recognize the positive contributions of the "civil society" groups in democratization and empowerment of disadvantaged groups. Due to his focus on critiquing the agents of change, Saubhagya's work is very well regarded by monarchists and conservatives. He was popular among shrewd conservative media personalities because he highlighted issues they wanted discussed but who themselves preferred to project a progressive, liberal or democratic façade. His position created difficulties for him immediately after

the fall of the monarchy.

For Nepal, Saubhagya's short life has very important lessons. One, pursuing a profession of one's choosing can take you far. An average student while in school, he had become one of Nepal's leading social scientists at the time of his death. He achieved that feat because he devoted his life to a field in which he was deeply and passionately interested. In that sense, he led a complete and fulfilled professional life. Instead of pushing children toward "lucrative" professions, if young children in Nepal are encouraged to follow their interests, they may achieve more and enjoy life as well. Second, the government of Nepal needs to adopt policies to encourage capable foreign trained Nepali professionals to return to their homeland. Saubhagya took longer to complete his Ph.D. at Harvard than Tribhuvan University regulations allowed. As a result, for several years after his return to Nepal he was not formally accepted into his former teaching position, and he worked without pay for several years. Unless the authorities in Nepal welcome those who return, others may be hesitant to do so. It will be fruitless to blame the brain drain when skilled people are pushed away instead of being pulled towards Nepal.

Mahendra Lawoti is Associate Professor of Political Science at Western Michigan University and was President of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies from 2005 to 2010.



PHOTO: DAMBAR CHEMJONG