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Introduction | Charting Himalayan Histories

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Introduction | Charting Himalayan Histories

Arik Moran
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Introduction

Historians cut a slightly odd group among scholars of the Himalaya. Although sympathetic to and fundamentally reliant on the ethnographies that have defined the field since the 1950s, they frequently shirk from engaging with the theoretical elaborations that these entail. At the same time, the sophisticated paradigms and frameworks developed for studying the history of neighboring regions (not to mention other areas, or indeed, global history) seldom feature in Himalayan history.¹ Neither members of the anthropological vanguard nor comfortably at home in the exalted tradition of their discipline, historians of the Himalaya have, till recently, been the odd ones out in most academic discussions on the region. This state of affairs, applicable to most of the twentieth century, has been undergoing a subtle change since the 1990s, as the ‘crisis’ of postcolonial anthropology (i.e., its complicity in European Imperialism and its need to redefine itself in the era of nation states) spurred a deep rethinking of the field. In the Himalaya, this also led to an opening of a hitherto decidedly anthropology-centered scholarship to other disciplines, some new (Development Studies, Refugee Studies) and others established (Geography, History). For all the terminological and epistemological bridges such a rapprochement entails, its pursuit should lead to closer collaboration between scholars of the region across disciplinary boundaries, and a continuing dialogue about interdisciplinary methodologies. To achieve this, historians must engage

innovatively with Himalayan sources while keeping abreast of developments in their disciplines; they must also effectively communicate their findings to non-historian scholars of the region so as to further advance the field. It is this straightforward formula that we adopt in presenting this issue, and which permeated the discussions that saw its inception at the Association for Asian Studies annual conference in Philadelphia in March 2014.

Future interdisciplinary engagements have a strong foundation in South Asian studies from which to build. From the 1980s, both historians and anthropologists have reflected on the colonial foundations of their disciplines in order to chart new post-colonial methodologies as well as understand better the workings of colonialism. Bernard Cohn, who led the way forward in such a disciplinary overhaul, emphasized the British early colonial use of history for “codifying and reinstituting the ruling practices” of previous regimes, and “as the most valuable form of knowledge on which to build the colonial state” (Cohn 1996: 5). A productive mutual borrowing between history and anthropology also underpinned much of the Subaltern Studies project, representing a continued coming-to-terms with history’s colonial legacy and its complicity with various forms of imperial and state power. Although subjected to various critiques, the Subaltern Studies movement did, as K. Sivaramakrishnan argues, succeed in unsettling older structural models of history and anthropology as “historical processes driven by economic and material structures

in society” and “timeless cultural ones that motivated human agents in cycles of production and reproduction” (2002: 215).²

In the context of the Himalaya, a number of anthropologists combined historical methods with ethnography even earlier, for a variety of purposes. French anthropologists, many of whom were affiliated with CNRS, were perhaps some of the first to engage seriously with historical methodology as a complement to ethnographic studies, a trend that carried over several generations.³ The combination of history and anthropology in Anglophone circles did not lag far behind, bequeathing a series of landmark studies that add considerable nuance to existing (anthropological and historical) theories on sound empirical bases (an inexhaustive list includes Allen 2012[1976], Gellner 2003[2001], Holmberg 1989, Macfarlane 1990, Ortner 1978, Ramble 2008, Shneiderman 2015).

The articles herein build upon these historiographical precedents, but also indicate the possibility for new connections across regions and a renewed interest in history as a disciplinary tool for thinking about the Himalaya. They draw upon various interdisciplinary influences, ranging from folklore to museum studies, and offer innovative readings of a variety of non-traditional sources in a number of languages. In this respect, they reflect the extensive resources available to historians willing to engage with such materials, and ultimately attest to the vitality of historical research on the Himalaya today.⁴ While it may be too soon to predict where this trend is headed, this collection of papers offers an opportunity to meditate upon the significance of history — and, specifically of modern history, which is their focus — as a disciplinary tool for the Himalayan regions.⁵ In what follows, we present two thematic threads that we perceive to be crucial for reading this collection in context: the definition of Himalayan space, and the ways in which its development may be fruitfully historicized.

Historicizing Himalayan Space

One of the first questions to deal with is what do we mean by ‘the Himalaya’ and what can we productively learn from an engagement with the space of this broad region? While “connected histories” that de-center the nation-state have offered a way to move beyond essentialisms in other historiographical contexts, this is not a clear-cut corrective in the case of the Himalaya where the region has sometimes been read as outside of history.⁶ In other words, some studies of the Himalaya have overly emphasized the “natural” aspect of the landscape at the expense of historically nuanced readings of the interaction between

people and place. The place in question, it soon transpires, is defined differently by different people: the Himalaya may thus include Tibet or not, may stretch into the South East Asian highland massif or not, may reach beyond the Karakoram to Afghanistan or may simply end at Kashmir. Sara Shneiderman (2010), noting a number of different scholarly concepts of the greater region, argues that the eastern Himalaya overlaps with upland Southeast Asia, and that the recently coined term ‘Zomia’ (more on which below) may be used as an analytical concept to facilitate comparison across regions rather than as an exclusive area description. She emphasizes that we should consider the historically contingent and politically activist ways people living in the Himalaya, who often engage in cross-border movements that bring them into contact with multiple states, have themselves employed different concepts of the region and notions of belonging to particular spaces.

Such reflections on changing and overlapping notions of space are congruent with the multi-disciplinary synchronization taking place between scholars engaged with the Himalaya, and may be usefully furthered to fend pervasive tendencies to romanticize the region as a space apart. While it might be tempting to trace this view to colonial writings, subcontinental notions of the sacred Himalaya — both predating and contemporary with British imperial expansion — have also contributed to this sense of otherness or other-worldliness. Indeed, scholars working in archaeology, anthropology, linguistics and geography, in particular, have deepened our understanding of multiple constructions of Himalayan sacred spaces, indicating that sacred space is very much a historically inflected concept. According to Axel Michaels, “holy mountains are not simply there, but made, they are the product of discovery and taming” (2004: 17). While analyzing ritual narratives invoking sacred geography in several “Tibetan-speaking societies” of Nepal, Charles Ramble observes that gods and other beings associated with particular places often differ a great deal from their established textual representation. Ramble suggests that “supernatural beings” offer a contingent and “flexible idiom for the representation of geographical space,” largely influenced by political and environmental contexts (1996: 142). The notions of sacred space and historical change are thus not mutually exclusive, a point further illustrated by Toni Huber and Stuart Blackburn’s edited volume on *Origins and Migrations in the Extended Eastern Himalayas* (2012), and in the reconstruction of the multiple layers that inform current perceptions of Mt Kailas as a sacred space by Alex McKay (2015).

Attending to the construction of ideas, sacred or otherwise, about the Himalaya is particularly important because the trope of the ahistorical Himalaya continues to crop

up in unexpected contexts. Contemporary scholarship employing the concept metaphor of Zomia, for example, has to tread a fine balance to avoid reading the region as outside of history.⁷ In an article on borderland road-building between Tibet/China, Nepal and India, Galen Murton succinctly summarizes a common interpretation of Zomia “as a radical framework that identifies Asia’s highland region as a traditionally non-capitalist and trans-state space extending from Southeast Asia to the Western Tibetan Plateau” (Murton 2013: 610). It is worth returning here to van Schendel’s much-cited article to engage with how he originally posited Zomia as a way to uncover the practical politics and unexamined assumptions undergirding area studies thinking. In the process, van Schendel clearly shows that areas are neither trans-historical nor do they encompass all aspects of social and cultural life in a given region. They are as much ideational, or “metaphorical spaces,” as geo-political or “material” (van Schendel 1992: 660). A focus on flows across regions, he argues, can offer a corrective to area thinking by highlighting the contingencies and continuous changes in the “architecture” of emerging “spatial configurations” (ibid 1992: 665). Thus, the idea of Zomia as articulated by van Schendel aims to destabilize pre-existing areas of study in the academy, and not to offer a more accurately described, fixed area for investigating all aspects of the greater Himalayan region.

If we are to take heed of van Schendel’s query about why seas and not mountains have been used to construct “Braudelian regional worlds,” (van Schendel 1992: 654), a project that James Scott (2009) pushed ahead successfully, we might fruitfully compare the career of Himalayan versus Indian Ocean studies in relation to the area of South Asia. Histories of the Indian Ocean in the western academy have formed an institutional synergy with the area of South Asia since the 1970s. This approach has gained considerable traction in the last two decades with the publication of studies linking South Asia to global history via the Indian Ocean from the early modern period to the twentieth century.⁸ Historians of the Himalaya have much to envy their Indian Ocean scholars. While the Himalaya provided links between South Asia and China, Southeast and Central Asia throughout history, their perception as a barrier to such contacts continues to dominate most literature on the subject. Thus, although it was through the Himalaya that Buddhism entered and revolutionized Tibetan society, religion, and polity, and while it was via the same region that Indian knowledge and technologies disseminated to and from Central Asia and beyond, very limited attention has been given to how these mountains have connected South Asia to world history frameworks.⁹ Instead of conceptualizing Zomia or the Himalaya as a

regional concept that logically facilitates comparison with other mountain regions, why not compare mountains and oceans via the intermediary of South Asia? After all, both sets of historical regional studies (one albeit slightly more institutionally developed than the other) focus on a number of similar themes, such as long distance merchant communities and global trade, inter-Asian connections, environmental history, migration, and the relationships between mobile people and states.

Murton’s reading of van Schendel also draws upon the notion of Zomia outlined in James Scott’s work, which raises the question of whether there is anything particularly distinct about the histories of capital and state formation that set the Himalaya apart. Perhaps it is because Himalayan histories do not fit well with the argument of upland Zomia as anti-state and resistant to capitalist accumulation that Scott seems to, at least partly, leave it out of his theoretical construct, which he references as the “great mountain realm on the marches of mainland Southeast Asia, China, India, and Bangladesh” (Scott 2009: 13-14). The notion that the Himalaya was bypassed by capitalist modernity, for example, often appears in development studies of Nepal that have typically dated the country’s involvement in circuits of global capital to *after* the country was opened to outsiders in the 1950s. Sociologist Chaitanya Mishra (2007), drawing on world systems theory and historical literature from Nepal, has argued against this interpretation, positing instead that the Rana rulers had by the 1880s very clearly incorporated Nepal into circuits of capital through state policies that favored the export of natural resources and labor over manufacture within the country. This highly uneven and intensified involvement with capital networks benefited a tiny ruling elite but limited possibilities for certain modes of production to develop within the borders of Nepal. When the country was opened to greater foreign contact in the 1950s, ‘underdevelopment’ was exacerbated as a growing middle class joined in the state-run project of self-enrichment by mediating Nepal’s economic peripheralization. Whether one agrees with Mishra’s basic theoretical premises or not, his highlighting of the close nexus between the state, mercantilist policies in the 18th and 19th centuries, histories of capitalism, and cross-border movements in the Himalaya points to the considerably more complex genealogy of the challenges the country currently faces. Mishra’s work thus firmly highlights the notion that even the ‘isolation’ of mountain regions has a particular history which can be linked to contemporary global trends.

The articles in this volume resonate with Mishra’s by emphasizing the close association of state-making in the Himalaya with an increased control of people, resources,

and the accumulation of wealth. The central Himalaya has a particularly long history of state-formation centered on the trade routes connecting the Tibetan plateau with the mountainous interior and the lowlands through controllable (i.e., defensible and taxable) mountain passes that follow seasonal market complexes in the plains. At the same time, state formation in the Himalaya has also coincided with resistance and refusal (see, for example, Krauskopff 1996, 1997, Lecomte-Tilouine 2009) — partly because of the opportunities of terrain, which the Zomia theory implies. However, as Mahesh Sharma's discussion of Gaddi narratives in this issue indicates, resistance and accommodation to regional states can blend in popular narratives and ritual observations such that it is not always easy to conceptually disaggregate the one from the other. Such difficulties are indicative of the complex social reality in which these West Himalayan narratives originate. As pastoral-nomads who have transitioned to sedentary or semi-sedentary lifestyles in the past two centuries, the West Himalayan Gaddis are a classic case of a borderland society that functions within the established framework of the nation-state.¹⁰ Similar to the Gaddis, the Gujjars of the plains uphold a semi-nomadic lifestyle that is emblematic of long-term continuities in lowland-highland dynamics: conspicuous in Himachal Pradesh in spring, Gujjar herders today secure the grazing rights that used to be granted (for a fee) by local kings through the Forest Department. At the same time, the histories of such groups also reveal stark ruptures that followed the reformulation of power relations in Republican India. Vasant Saberwal (1998) has thus demonstrated how, in the case of the Gaddi, politicization is linked to the need to protect the grazing rights associated with the group's legacy of a non-sedentary lifestyle, reminding us of the inextricability of ecology, state, and society in the region as explored by Chetan Singh in *Natural Premises* (1988).

The relationship with areas beyond the mountain chain in both Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand is more complex. Supported by an extensive network of borderland traders until the 1950s, the highland regions adjoining Tibet (e.g., Upper Kinnaur along the Sutlej) are home to a dazzling array of agents: smugglers of goods, authorized pilgrims to Mount Kailas, ascetics who never made much of borders to begin with, and, most recently, an invigorated Sino-Indian relationship that seems set to transform the region by bringing it closer to both India and China.¹¹ Borderland histories are thus central to engagements with the Himalaya as a region. Mobility, migration, and the fluid nature of many borders in the region means that Himalayan people's cross-border affiliations — despite modern nation-states' frequent attempts to fashion exclusive and narrow defini-

tions of citizenship — have merited increasing attention across disciplines in the last several years (cf. Chhetri 2015; Das 2014; Evans 2010; Gerwin and Bergmann 2012; Guyot-Rechard 2013 Middleton 2013; Shneiderman 2013). Given the relative novelty of borderland studies in South Asia, their utility in troubling methodological nationalism, and the continued need to untangle the colonial histories of many of the region's borders, we should expect borderland studies to continue to grow in scope and variety (cf. Gellner 2013) — and the Himalaya are likely to be a major locus of such studies.

Writing Histories of the Himalaya

As the above indicates, we need more engagement with histories of the Himalaya; the articles in this volume contribute to such a trend. Many historical 'gaps' still need to be filled not only to increase our empirical understanding of the region but also to allow us to theorize better the relationship between the past and the present. Gender is one such area that is often sidelined in existing historical literature. For example, we know anecdotally that royal women were key players in mountain polities and state formation, although their role has not always been agreed upon. In the case of Nepal, some historians have not been willing to imagine royal women as effective political actors.¹² Sanjog Rupakheti's recent dissertation, however, "Leviathan or Paper Tiger: State Making in the Himalayas, 1740-1900" (2012), offers several chapters that push forward a rethinking of gendered and familial relations in the making of the Nepali state. He analyses the House of Gorkha's construction of a narrow Rajput identity, partly through marriage alliances and controlled endogamy; the state's reform of inheritance laws to promote same-caste marriage; and the centrality of female slaves to the formation of elite households. Several of the collected articles indicate that further work on gender, political power, and women's agency in Himalayan polities will shed new light on the issue of state formation and sovereignty.

In addition to bringing elite women's lives into historical focus, the historical experiences of the people "who escaped the historian's net" merit considerably more attention than that usually allotted to them.¹³ Social history and history-from-below have been under-emphasized in Himalayan historiography, which has instead tended to piece together, from inscriptions and royal documents, the political and (state sponsored) religious history of the region.¹⁴ As Charles Ramble, Peter Schwieger and Alice Travers point out in the introduction to a volume on new explorations in Tibetan social history, work on marginal regions away from the state center as well as middle-rank-ing strata of society, in addition to Gramscian-style subal-

terns, will add nuance to our knowledge of state and society more broadly. This observation easily can be applied to other regions of the Himalaya where the view from below or the margins is rarely emphasized. Some of our collected articles, such as those by Alice Travers, Jayeeta Sharma, and Leah Koskimaki provide case studies that enrich our understanding of the social histories of early twentieth-century Tibet, Darjeeling and Kumaon respectively.

In order to approach history-writing from understudied perspectives, it is vital to find sources that move beyond the narrow bounds of high politics, as well as to engage with various genres of literature and documentation in Himalayan languages. Articles in this issue do so by drawing from a variety of unique and under-explored sources, such as oral histories and interviews, folklore, Hindi newspapers, Nepali state archives, and Tibetan autobiographies. Searching for innovative sources or reading relatively well-known sources with new questions in mind can help to build up a richer historiography of subaltern lives, as well as move away from historical paradigms left over from colonial writing. Witzel (1990) and Mishra (2010), for example, advocate for historians to adopt a more nuanced approach to reading 'traditional' sources such as *vamshavalis* and *thyasaphu* (or *chatas* in Mishra's formulation) for their historical textures rather than simply mining them as sources.¹⁵ Emma Martin takes this call for new readings farther. Tracing the meanings of diplomatic encounters and material exchanges across the Tibetan-British imperial borderlands during the 13th Dalai Lama's brief flight as a refugee to Calcutta in 1910, she shows how the British foreign department drew upon both the expertise of officers with practical experience in Tibetan culture and Himalayan states, as well as precedents from negotiations in Persian courtly settings worked out in the plains, to shape an appropriate diplomatic protocol for receiving the Tibetan leader. Focusing on the etiquette around the traditional Tibetan silk scarf or *khatak*, Martin uses the notion of "material knowledge" to highlight the contingent and layered creation of colonialism in the borderland. In her article, the notion of the Himalaya is composed of multiple threads — the exigencies of British imperial power and diplomacy at the edge of the subcontinent, the histories of other imperial contacts, especially in the plains, and the shifting relationship between China and the states to its south, as well as the circulation of material objects and personnel across open and unsettled borders. She draws upon painting, colonial archives, Tibetan monographs on the *khatak*, and several memoirs to draw out a finely nuanced history of cross-cultural encounters in the Himalaya.

Mahesh Sharma's paper explores gender and patriarchy through oral traditions and material evidence from the

western Himalaya. Focusing on the erstwhile kingdoms of Chamba and Kangra, Sharma points to the links between the state's provision of access to water and its agents' perception of gender roles. In regional folklore, the founding of states and the achievement and maintenance of productive control over water resources (the two often closely knit together) are as intimately tied to the physical and social dominance of women, including, in extreme cases, honor killing and ritual sacrifice. Power, which accrued from controlling gender relations and natural resources, was further codified through the formalization of local Rajput identities from the Mughal period. Sharma's analysis of Gaddi shepherds' ballads further captures hints of resistance to caste domination and hegemonic gender norms that bolstered regional state formation.

Leah Koskimaki's paper builds upon her ethnographic work in Uttarakhand as well as collected Hindi newspapers printed from the 1920s to the 1940s. This unique combination of sources allows her to trace how 'youth' developed as a political category in the public sphere in the last decades before independence. In Kumaon and Garhwal, youth (generally male, upper-caste and Hindu but referred to in universal terms) were exhorted via regional publications in Hindi to actively take on new political roles in the 1920s and act out alternative, anti-colonial futures. Koskimaki shows that youth activism became an iterative process as later generations chose from available political language and the examples of particular activists to shape new political strategies related to the movement for a new state and economic development therein.

In her study of private schools in pre-1951 Tibet, Alice Travers combines oral history interviews and published Tibetan materials, particularly autobiography, to chart the dense landscape of non-religious private schools that then existed in Central Tibet, and to characterize the persons, motivations, and social strategies behind them. Painstakingly researched, her paper highlights a middle layer of society that often had professional connections in government service, and that independently established educational institutions as a form of non-religious, social service. Travers notes that this middling class, "composed of government secretaries, aristocratic families' and monastic treasurers, managers and secretaries, merchants, large land-holding farmers and military officers," managed to largely reproduce its technical skills and social standing through such private educational establishments.

Darjeeling transformed from an exploitative hill station, built upon the backs of mostly non-local laborers from the 1830s, into a space of cosmopolitan regional modernity with new possibilities for Himalayan migrants by the late

nineteenth century, according to Jayeeta Sharma. Drawing upon colonial reports and oral history interviews, Sharma reviews the making of the sanatorium and the hub of tea plantation capital, as a space which also embodied possibilities for upward mobility and encounters with colonial modernity for families of some hill laborers and merchants. By focusing on migrant laborers and peripatetic traders who participated in the city and its industries, Sharma's case study of a hill station in the making further links Himalayan history to South Asian histories of labor and urban development.

Sanjog Rupakheti's paper focuses on state-formation in Nepal from the perspective of administration and law. He reads a number of petitions from across the kingdom in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to highlight the expectations diverse state subjects held for the developing Gorkha state. Arguing against vestiges of the colonial stereotype of "Oriental despotism" and ahistorical, ritual-based notions of the Nepali state, he suggests that state-making in Nepal was rather a practical affair dependent upon effective judicial administration tailored to diverse groups of people. Rupakheti's analysis highlights the processual nature of state-building, the state's intervention in "intimate aspects of social lives" and the state's evolving capacities to reach into the grassroots and community level — all of which depended on practical and day-to-day modes of governance.

Read together, these papers make a case for moving beyond political histories towards a regional approach that builds and expands upon the paradigms advanced by van Schendel and Scott, and that is based on innovative readings of new and familiar sources to create new social and cultural histories. Such histories are indispensable if we are to conceptualize more fully the always-changing relationships between people and place, region and global power, discipline and area. From the fortunes of Tibetan *khataks* in 1910-Calcutta and the private schools of the plateau prior to 1951, to the interactions of plantation workers and traders with 19th century-Darjeeling and youth politics in early 20th century-Kumaon, and finally to the multiple methods for controlling nascent states in Himachal Pradesh and Nepal, this issue is a contribution to the exciting new directions of Himalayan history in the past decades. As the cursory outline of the field above indicates, it is not likely to be the last.

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Endnotes

1. Within the discipline of history in the western academy, the historian still finds a need to make the case for the centrality of the Himalaya as a region of study. In contrast, other disciplines (such as development studies and anthropology) may be more apt to view the Himalaya as a central, rather than a peripheral, region of study. A succinct appraisal of these processes, to which we shall return, may be found in Shneiderman (2010). For an important exception to these trends, see Gellner (2003[2001]).
2. For a cogent assessment of the school's development and devolution, see Eaton (2000).
3. For a useful outline of the trajectory of this field, see Toffin (2009).
4. A number of scholars have clearly argued that sources are not a limitation for the writing of Himalayan histories. However, as for example Witzel (1990) has pointed out, the preservation of archives and sources should remain of concern to historians and other scholars of the region. For a sense of the range of available sources see, Witzel (1990), Mishra (2010), Sharma (2009). For reproductions of records

either reproduced in or translated into Nepali or English, often with some commentary, see the journals *Purnima*, *Ancient Nepal*, *CNAS*, *Regmi Research Series*, etc. (available at <<http://www.digitalhimalaya.org>>).

5. For example, at the recent 4th Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya, less than 5% of all papers presented were historical studies.

6. See Subrahmanyam (1997) for an early and much-cited article advocating for “connected” rather than comparative histories. This dichotomy is, however, relatively common to debates on world history (cf Dunn 2000).

7. On Zomia as a concept metaphor, see Jonsson (2010).

8. A random sample of a much larger field of work, which nevertheless includes various perspectives on the link between South Asia, the Indian Ocean and global history, includes: Mukherjee (2011), Ashin Das Gupta (2001), Sunil Amrith (2013). Bhattacharya et al (2007). Jos Gommans (2012), Hofmeyr (2012), Anderson (2000).

9. Several exceptions which do make a case, more or less directly, for linking Himalayan to global histories, include Bernardo (2011), Chatterjee (2013), Gommans (1995), van Spengen (2000).

10. On the impact of civic boundary demarcations within India states on social relations, see Piliavsky (2013).

11. See, for example, Murton’s (2014) observation on the opening of the Nathu la trade route between India and China (in 2006) occurring in the very same week as the Beijing-Lhasa high-speed railway was inaugurated, pointing to the Himalaya’s facilitation of extensive connections between South Asia and China’s political center.

12. For a critical assessment of this theme in light of postcolonial discourse theory, see Moran (2015). For non-academic, “anecdotal” histories of royal women in Nepal, see Karmacharya (2005). For an exceptionally negative view of women as historical actors see Acharya (2013).

13. Ramble, Schwieger and Travers borrow this term from William Dalrymple’s written discussion of the Mutiny Papers in the National Archives of India, Delhi, which contain a great deal of information about the non-elite and the everyday.

14. This seems to be the case for Tibetan histories as much as for those of Nepal. Ramble, Shwieger and Travers (2013). See also, Slusser and Vajracharya (2005), DR Regmi (1965).

15. For an example of this method’s fruitful implementation in South India, see Rao et al. (2001).

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