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## 17th International Association for Ladakh Studies (IALS) Conference Report

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contributed to the success of the 17th IALS conference.

To end on a personal note, I am honoured to be the first Ladakhi to become President of IALS in the association's thirty-five years. I take this as an opportunity more than a challenge to continue my aspirations for the success of the Association and look forward to working with executive and advisory committees and the larger membership of the Association.

Sonam Wangchok

### ***Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya***

**Kathmandu, Nepal**

**22-24 July 2015**

The Fourth Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya took place at the Shankar Hotel in Kathmandu 22-24 July 2015. The conference was organized by the Kathmandu-based Social Science Baha, in partnership with the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies, Britain-Nepal Academic Council, and the Centre for Himalayan Studies-CNRS, making the conference a truly international endeavor. Coordinating a successful event just three months after the April 25 earthquake was an impressive accomplishment on the part of the organizers. The conference was notable for bringing together researchers based in Nepal and around the world, including many Nepali scholars, with presentations from a range of social science disciplines. Abstracts from the papers are available on Social Science Baha's website at <<http://soscbaha.org/activities/conferences-and-workshops/conference.html>>.

Over the three days of the conference, 67 papers covered a range of disciplinary approaches, including anthropology, sociology, political science, history, geography, religious studies, ethnomusicology, environmental studies, and peace and conflict studies. While panels covered a wide range of topics, some common themes included migration, indigeneity and other forms of identity, the meaning and importance of land and place, and many ways of investigating politics and the state. Several panels addressed topics related to women and gender, especially in relation to the forthcoming constitution and federal system. Another strand of papers focused on the environment, with papers on topics such as food and security, climate change, and livelihoods.

In addition to three full days of paper presentations, each evening featured a timely and relevant keynote or panel. Tanka Subba, Vice-Chancellor of Sikkim University, discussed "Nepalis without Nepal: Migration, Livelihood and Identity." Kanak Mani Dixit, while introducing Subba's presentation, argued that looking at Nepal from the view of an Indian-born Nepali speaker would provide an important perspective on India-Nepal relations, especially on the 1950 Indo-Nepal treaty. Subba traced the history of migration from Nepal to Darjeeling and beyond in India. In Subba's history, early migrants, who were mostly Dalit and Janajati (or indigenous ethnicities), were not attached to a Hindu Nepali identity until later waves of Tagadhari (upper-caste) migrants initiated a religious revivalism that caused a decline in these Nepalis' relations with their neighbors. In many cases, this has led to exile, beginning with evictions of Nepalis from Northeast India and later Lhotsampas from Bhutan. Subba painted a bleak picture of the

situation of Nepalis outside of Nepal, who are treated poorly by Indian neighbors but hesitate to claim affiliation with Nepal, which they view as not powerful enough to be worth affiliating with.

The second evening brought together four panelists to discuss "Earthquake 2015 and Social Scientists: Reflections from the Field and Afar." Panelists Bhaskar Gautam (Martin Chautari), Mallika Shakya (South Asian University), Austin Lord (Yale University), and Jeevan Baniya (Social Science Baha) reflected on prompts from moderator David Gellner (University of Oxford) about what social science has done since the earthquake, and what social scientists should be doing about the earthquake. Gautam discussed some themes emerging from his observations of earthquake response, such as the need to be critical of the popular tendency to laud Nepalis' "resilience" and to continue to keep a critical eye on how reconstruction will be undertaken to be eco-friendly and inclusive. Shakya talked about a much-discussed op-ed essay published in the Kathmandu Post, which she co-authored with Gaurav KC, and also discussed dimensions of belonging, locality, and nationality in written responses to the earthquake. Lord emphasized the social media response to the earthquake and raised the question of the relationship between social sciences and advocacy. Baniya contributed findings from post-earthquake research, which revealed that woman-headed households, children, and the elderly were facing the greatest difficulty in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake and later response. He discussed additional problems in the delivery of relief materials, such as partisan interests in tailoring relief efforts, and a lack of resources to distribute necessary materials to all affected people.

Following the panel's introduction, audience members provided questions and comments. Many of these had to do with the relationship between conducting research and doing relief work, and the ethical obligations of researchers to the people they work with. Other comments brought up avenues for research to be conducted in the future, such as tracing the institutions and money flows involved in ongoing relief and reconstruction or understanding lived experiences of the earthquake at a micro-level. While many interesting themes were raised, the broad and somewhat unstructured nature of the discussion did not provide a venue for detailed discussion of these issues. Hopefully this was the first of many conversations that will continue as this community of scholars continues to engage with social science and the aftermath of the earthquakes.

The final evening panel provided an example of a more targeted avenue for research about earthquakes. Shamik Mishra and Deepak Aryal, archivists from Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya, presented on the topic of "1934 Earthquake Revisited: A View from the Archives," and with Pratyoush Onta (Martin Chautari) as moderator led discussion on the topic. Mishra made a compelling case for the relevance of studying the 1934 earthquake, based on the availability of archival materials about the 1934 earthquake as compared to other disasters; the state's active role in relief work; the issue of foreign aid, which was not accepted from foreign governments but only from individual groups; and the power struggles in the politics of relief and reconstruction and political consequences of the disaster. Mishra discussed the archival materials available at Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya related to the earthquake, such as chronicles, ballads, newspapers, monographs,

and memoirs. Beyond their own collection, they provided suggestions of additional archives that could have other sources of information. Following discussion of possible sources and uses of archival material about the 1934 earthquake and other disasters, Onta concluded the session with a call to action to build improved archives in Nepal, especially after many archives, including Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya, have suffered earthquake damage.

The Fourth Annual Kathmandu Conference was characterized by collegial but challenging conversations throughout paper presentations, panel discussions, and in the many opportunities for socializing during meals and tea breaks. Participants, and the organizers in particular, demonstrated exemplary commitment to the conference despite the significant logistical hurdles of the earthquake, which destroyed part of the normal venue of the conference, and a *bandh* on the final day of the conference. The wide range of intellectual approaches to studying this geographic region provided a varied set of perspectives and subject matter.

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