

June 2017

Annual Conference on South Asia

Pasang Yangjee Sherpa
The New School

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

Recommended Citation

Sherpa, Pasang Yangjee. 2017. Annual Conference on South Asia. *HIMALAYA* 37(1).
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol37/iss1/23>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This Conference Report 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.

A few papers/sessions focused on issues that did not fit the themes elaborated above. Swatahsiddha Sarkar's and Babika Khawas' presentation, for example, discussed the state of Nepal studies in Indian sociology/anthropology. There was also an interactive session with the editors/representatives of four leading academic journals on Nepal studies published from Nepal, the US, and Europe: Pratyoush Onta (Editor, *SINHAS*), Man Bahadur Khattri (Editor, *Dhaulgiri Journal of Sociology & Anthropology*), Michael Hutt (Contributing Editor, *EBHR*) and Heather Hindman (who represented *HIMALAYA*). This session was beneficial for both young and senior scholars working on Nepal and the Himalayas.

There was also a panel centered on the official release of Richard Burghart's posthumous publication of *The History of Janakpur: A Study of Asceticism and the Hindu Polity* (Mandala Book Point, 2016). Dr. Ram Baran Yadav, the first President of Nepal who himself is from Janakpur, released the book as the chief guest. Martin Gaenzle (University of Vienna), who edited and introduced Burghart's book, was unfortunately absent, though his note for the occasion was read *in absentia*. Hutt was among the speakers who commented further on the time that he shared with Burghart, thereby making the evening's gathering an emotionally charged one. Speakers like Dr. Ramawatar Yadav (former Vice-chancellor, Purbanchal University) and Jacob Rink (Yale University) offered critical comments on the book's academic content and methodological insights and the use of notations for transliteration of local terms. Deepak Thapa, Director of the SSB, also shared his long journey working with the manuscript

and the justification for his decision to not tamper with the originality of Burghart's *magnum opus*.

The three-day academic gathering was expectedly engaging. All the sessions were heavily attended and elicited productive debates that contributed toward ongoing academic discussions surrounding the study of and research conducted in Nepal and the Himalaya.

Swatahsiddha Sarkar and
Babika Khawas
University of North Bengal

Annual Conference on South Asia

Madison, WI

20–23 October 2016

The 45th Annual Conference on South Asia was held at the Madison Concourse Hotel, October 20–23 in Madison, WI. There were 750 registered participants, 10 exhibitors, 12 preconferences, 156 panels, and 6 association meetings. The conference theme this year was Decay, inviting papers and panels that explore destruction and its consequences for life afterwards.

The Joseph W. Elder Keynote Lecture, “Perpetually on the Cusp of Crisis: Women, Peace, and Security in the South Asian Region” was presented by Radhika Coomaraswamy on Friday evening. Coomaraswamy is former UN Under Secretary General and Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict (2006–2012) and UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women (1994–2003). Her address analyzed the current state of women, peace, and security in the South Asian region, drawing on her field consultations.

Coomaraswamy asked, “How do issues of ‘voluntariness and consent,’ ‘responsibility to protect,’ ‘protection of civilians,’ ‘counterterrorism,’ and ‘empowerment of human rights defenders,’ among other global norms, play out in the South Asian region? What has been our response and is there an alternative to assimilation or defiance?”

This report covers selected panels and papers focusing on Nepal and the Himalayan region included in the main conference, beginning with the Himalayan Policy Research Conference. Organized as a preconference event, the Himalayan Policy Research Conference consisted of four sessions with a total of 27 papers. The four sessions focused on “Development Issues,” “Education, Health and Social Safety Nets,” “Geopolitical Conflicts and Human Rights,” and “Agro-forestry, Energy and Environmental Issues.” These sessions brought together papers covering issues of conflict, human rights, refugees, well-being, climate change, agriculture, and sustainability in Himalayan countries.

During the main conference, the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal and their aftermath were the focus of several presentations. A panel titled “City Mandala, City Decay: The Use of Historical Narratives in Post-Quake Kathmandu” brought field reports by panelists Drew Haxby (University of Michigan) and Andrew Nelson (University of North Texas) from post-quake Kathmandu. This panel asked, “In light of the earthquakes of 2015, which damaged many of the city's architectural achievements, how might a re-reading of Kathmandu's history illuminate the city's prospects for the future?” Nelson shared his observations from the Newar locality of Khokhana in his paper “Building

Back Better—For Whom?.” Haxby’s paper, “Amity and the Destruction of Ownership: Notes on Household Transformations in Post-Earthquake Kathmandu,” explored the ways in which the earthquake managed to disrupt families’ ownership arrangements. Heather Hindman (University of Texas at Austin), who chaired the session, discussed the significance of personal narratives of the earthquakes and their impact on the city of Kathmandu.

In the panel “Care for the Body in South Asia: Conceptualizing Threats,” Jennifer Rothchild (University of Minnesota, Morris) presented the paper “Living on the Fault Lines: Women’s Sexuality and Reproductive Health in Post-Disaster Nepal.” Using life history narratives, she examined the intersections among reproductive health, gender, sexuality, and social development before, during, and post-disaster. Her project dealt with reproductive health and sexuality from the perspective of women living within a society bound by rigid gender and sexuality norms, but torn apart by natural disaster and the political and economic instability that followed the earthquakes in Nepal.

In her paper titled “Temporalities of Affliction and Care Before and After the Nepal Earthquakes,” Aidan Seale-Feldman (University of California, Los Angeles) shared her field experience of working in quake-hit communities and an assessment of treating mental health issues. This paper was included in the panel “Conflict and Change in Nepal” along with Sarah Speck and Mahendra Lawoti. Speck (University of Zurich) shared her preliminary findings from her dissertation fieldwork among elderly populations in Nepal. Lawoti (Western Michigan University) discussed how the 2015 Constitution of Nepal was drafted,

and showed that the constitution writing process was “manipulative” and contradicted the “participatory” narrative presented by the government. He demonstrated that although citizens’ feedback was sought, the consultation process focused on only a few selected places and was completed in a few days, limiting participation of citizens.

‘Borderlands’ was another prominent theme for Himalaya-focused panelists. The four-person panel entitled “The Making of a Borderland: Disease, Cultural Change, Identity and Flood Control in the Indo-Nepal Tarai” explored southern borderland issues. Tom Robertson (Worcester Polytechnic Institute) presented findings from his study of the political ecology of disease in lowland Nepal before 1950. Arjun Guneratne (Macalester College) presented “Are the Tharu a ‘Tribe’ or a ‘Caste’? Reflections on Colonial Categories and the Making of a Border District in Nepal.” Amanda Snellinger (University of Oxford), presenting through Skype, shared her field observations from the Nepal-India border in her paper “Supra-national, National, and Sub-national Sentiments: Belonging Along the Parsa/ Bihar Border.” Eric Strahorn (Florida Gulf Coast University) presented “A Preliminary History of Flooding and Flood Control in the Tarai Region of India and Nepal.” In a panel on South Asian social movements, Debarati Sen (Kennesaw State University) engaged a discussion of borderlands in her paper “‘Gorkhaland is Our Business’: Women’s Entrepreneurial Selves and Subnational Struggle in Eastern India.”

The session “Mobility and Containment: Examining the Everyday Experiences of Rural Road Development in South Asia”

aimed at broadening ongoing conversations about the complex impacts of rural road development across highland South Asia. In “Rural Road Building in Nepal: Possibilities and Limits of Critical Pedagogy of Development,” Pushpa Hamal (University of Toronto) argued that it is important to document and analyze the role of roads and road building in producing inequality and cultural marginalization. Tulasi Sidel’s (Kathmandu University) and Katherine Rankin’s (University of Toronto) paper (read by Hamal) shared their findings of a year of archival research on road building in Nepal. Their data draws from English and Nepali language sources including government reports, plans and policies, donor reports, major national newspapers and other popular media, and Nepal-focused scholarly literature. Galen Murton (University of Colorado-Boulder) discussed trans-border road development between Nepal and China, specifically trans-border road projects in Nepal’s Rasuwa and Mustang districts, in an effort to better understand the connections between international infrastructure and the politics of state building in Nepal.

Teri Allendorf (University of Wisconsin-Madison) organized a two-part panel on “People and the Environment: Change and Sustainability.” The first part covered environmental change across the Himalaya, scaling up from the specifics of gendered perceptions of tigers in Chitwan National Park (Allendorf), to people’s perceptions of environmental change in two socio-religiously different villages (Pasang Yangjee Sherpa, The New School), to a long-term perspective on change in one village (John Metz, Northern Kentucky University). The

second part covered environmental sustainability through the lens of sustainable solar energy in Ladakh and Zaskar (Carey Clouse, University of Massachusetts-Amherst), clean water in Kumaon (Rachael Goodman, University of Wisconsin-Madison), and trekking and religious tourism in the Sahyadris (Anne Feldhaus, Arizona State University).

In a separate panel on environmental development in South Asia, Sya Kedzior (Towson University) presented on her study of changing environmental awareness among Hindu devotees in the Ganga River Basin, for which she drew on interviews and analysis of educational materials and other program information to understand the approach and rationale behind a high-profile awareness-raising program organized at the 2013 Kumbh Mela in Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh.

The panel “Deities, Pilgrimage, and Tourism in the Western Himalayas” focused on religion in the Indian Himalaya. Aftab Singh Jassal (Duke University) presented on narrative and ritual incarnations of Krishna in Garhwal, and Ehud Halperin (Tel Aviv University) discussed the obscure origins of the Indian Himalayan goddess Hadimba and how she entered into local retellings of the *Mahabharata* epic. James Lochtefeld (Carthage College) discussed sacred networks in the Garhwal Himalaya and Luke Whitmore’s (University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point) paper “The Pursuit of Siva and the Pursuit of Dharma” focused on religion in Kedarnath. Whitmore presented a second paper on tourism and development in Uttarakhand in the panel “Contestations of Place: New intersections of Tourism, Development, and Heritage.” Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) put

Nepal’s popular *Svasthanivrataskatha* textual tradition into conversation with other Puranic works from elsewhere on the subcontinent in the panel “What Makes a Mahatmya a Mahatmya? Genre, Form and Function in South Asian Textual Traditions.”

The annual meeting of the Association of Nepal and Himalayan Studies’ Executive Council met on Friday night, and the General Members meeting was held on Saturday evening. Next year, the ANHS Executive Council will meet at the Himalayan Studies Conference (HSC) V, which will take place September 1–4, 2017 at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Acclaimed author Manjushree Thapa and scholar and writer Lama Jabb will be the keynote speakers.

Pasang Yangjee Sherpa
The New School

2016 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion

San Antonio, TX

17–22 November 2016

Religious Studies scholars from around the United States and abroad gathered in San Antonio, Texas from 17–22 November for the 2016 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society for Biblical Literature (SBL). The world’s largest conference on the study of religion, this year’s joint meeting of the AAR and SBL had nearly 9,500 members in attendance at over 1,300 panels and exhibitions [-https://www.aarweb.org/node/2562-](https://www.aarweb.org/node/2562).

Several groups and sections focused on Hinduism, Buddhism, and South Asia held panels and sessions related

to the Himalayan region. The Religion in South Asia Section’s “Garland of Forgotten Goddesses” featured papers examining regional deities in Nepal and India. These presentations explored the local traditions surrounding these deities, as well as the ways that they configure in transregional goddess traditions. Also sponsored by the Religion in South Asia Section, “Praise Poetry across South Asian Religious Traditions” considered modes of interpreting praises to gods, kings, religious figures, and pilgrimage sites, as well as the role of praise poetry in cross-cultural South Asian traditions.

An exploratory session on “Navaratri in South Asia and Beyond” queried the socio- and politico-religious dimensions of the performance of the Navaratri festival in India and Nepal. Co-sponsored by the Religion in South Asia Section and the Religion and Ecology Group, the “Religion, Landscape, and Ecology in South Asia” panel explored “how new relationships of humanity to nature have been negotiated in the religious imagination of early modern and contemporary South Asia.” Its papers considered the complexities of sacralizing space in a number of contexts throughout the Himalayas and South Asia, from Kashmir to south India and beyond.

The Buddhism section’s “Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Tibetan Protector Deities” endeavored to think through ways of developing a theoretical framework for understanding protector deities and the communities that develop around them. Papers in this panel examined the ritual, cosmological, mythical, and sectarian aspects of texts and ritual practices related to protector deities in Tibet. A book session for Janet Gyatso’s *Being Human in a Buddhist World: An Intellectual History of Medicine in Early*