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Himalayan Studies and Interdisciplinarity Workshop

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Himalayan Studies and Interdisciplinarity Workshop

**Centre for Himalayan Studies (CHS)
University of North Bengal (NBU), India
December 11-12, 2018**

The World Mountain Day was uniquely observed at the Centre for Himalayan Studies (CHS) at the University of North Bengal (NBU), India through a two-day workshop (December 11-12, 2018) on the theme “Himalayan Studies and Interdisciplinarity.” The workshop’s broad theme intended to create a space for dialogue among those who examine the Himalayas, with particular reference to Nepal, from different disciplinary vantage points. Although the pitched theme attracted an expected mix of scholars from different disciplines such as History, Political Science, Anthropology, Sociology, Economics, Geography, and even Comparative Literature, the gathering lacked scholars specializing in ecology and security/strategic studies. However, the workshop made a modest attempt to defy the truism that Himalayan studies scholarship emerged mostly out of the contributions made from outside the Himalayas. With its declared focus on Nepal, the workshop opened up the floor for scholars, mostly from Nepal, to talk about Nepal. There were also scholars from elsewhere on the Indian subcontinent who, having worked on Nepal at some

length, also engaged with meaningful presentations and interactions.

In her inaugural speech, Maitreyee Choudhury (Director, CHS) stressed the need for interdisciplinarity to continue within Himalayan studies. The chief guest Sanchari Roy Mukherjee (Dean, Faculty Arts Commerce & Law, NBU) emphasized the growing importance of science and technological studies in the Himalayas and the consequential politics of knowledge involved in such developments in the context of the Himalayas. Anup K Dutta (NBU) emphatically put forth the need for conceiving the Himalayas as a multi-state formation and for defamiliarizing social science research practices from the received notions of borders and boundaries if Himalayan studies is to be continued in a persuasive manner. In his erudite keynote address, Bani Prasanna Misra (formerly with CHS, NBU) reflected upon the philosophy of the social sciences and the grooming of interdisciplinarity in the social sciences while elaborating on the problems and prospects of adopting interdisciplinarity in Himalayan studies.

The first academic session began with two significant presentations on Nepal studies and the Himalayas. Pratyoush Onta (Martin Chautari, Nepal) shared his almost thirty years experience of editing an academic journal, *Studies in Nepali History and Society* (SINHAS), and reflected upon the extent to which SINHAS could attain the goal of interdisciplinarity while reflecting on the kind of Himalayan studies scholarship the journal has been encouraging. Bhaskar Gautam (North South Collectives, Biratnagar, Nepal) examined the diverse perspectives of understanding the Himalayas in general while focusing particularly on the perception adopted by the

international development agencies (ICIMOD, for example) to understand the Himalayas in particular.

The three papers presented in the second academic session were broadly focused on issues related to migration and social relations. Gaurav KC's jointly authored paper with Pranab Kharel (both of the Kathmandu School of Law, Purbanchal University, Kathmandu) attempted to make an historical reappraisal of the tellurian foothold of migrating Nepalis in northeast India, Burma, and Tibet with a claim that much of our understanding with respect to Nepali migration is based on the standpoint of military history. As an alternative approach, they pitched the need for developing a non-military and non-*janajati* historical approach to understanding the Nepali exodus and its historicity. The discussant Binayak Sundas (CHS, NBU), however, commented that the major problem with the paper was that it had no reference to any particular time frame upon which it was focused, which indeed glossed over the complex nuances of understanding such movements being attached to periods. Sundas also pointed out that in using the tool of oral histories, as embedded within family histories, the paper opened itself up to a classic problem of historical methods, one faced by Greek historians like Herodotus and Thucydides. This problem lies in the fact that history, as such, becomes conditioned to a subject's memory or being alive or even his conscious understanding of an event, so much so that anything beyond his subjective consciousness also remains beyond critical purview. In another paper on the same panel, Mithilesh Kumar (Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Patna) discussed an intriguing intersection of labour, migration, and resistance based on

an ethnographic study of the Raxaul railway site on the Indo-Nepal border region. Chudamani Basnet (South Asian University, New Delhi) spoke on intermarriage between Madhesi men and Pahadi women in southern Nepal, and examined the crisscrosses between caste and ethnic boundaries vis-à-vis the typification of family relations through newer versions of gendered prototypes.

There were three presentations in the last session, followed by a roundtable on the workshop theme. Mukund Giri (Sikkim Government College, Gangtok) made an interesting presentation on the various dimensions of an interdisciplinary approach and mapped out the extent of interdisciplinary research in the existing studies on the Communist movement in Nepal. Based on a socio-historical approach, Lokranjan Parajuli (Martin Chautari, Kathmandu) discussed the intricate stories—like cold war politics, ideological impetus, Indian interest, and concerns for indigeneity in higher education system—involved in the foundation of Tribhuvan University, the first university of Nepal. The last paper of the workshop was presented by Mallika Shakya (South Asian University, New Delhi) through audio-visual mode. Shakya's video presentation focused on the issues of being and belonging in post-earthquake Nepal and the emerging politics of knowledge that evolved out of the ways in which the earthquakes and post-earthquake scenarios were represented either in the media or in the anthropological excursions made by various foreign scholars. She compared the phenomenological experiences of the earthquakes and the exuberance of media-driven anthropological discourses with comparable situations of decolonization in social sciences in Africa, which, according

to her, sets limits to the discursivity of anthropological practices in the Global South. Discussant Jayjit Sarkar (Raiganj University, West Bengal) queried Shakya about how the theories of the Global South could assist our understanding of the Himalayas, which is conventionally driven by a tendency of reversing the telos. Shakya maintained that the telos not only needs to be reversed but indeed needs to be overcome. Her engagement with the theories of the Global South would primarily be through a critique of developmentalism, she said.

One of the major attractions of the workshop was a roundtable on the workshop's main theme of Himalayan studies and interdisciplinarity. Moderated by Pratyoush Onta, the two-hours-long roundtable involved serious discussions on issues such as the need to promote regional languages in Himalayan research, to emphasize intra-institutional cross-disciplinary practices, to foster regional scholarship between India and Nepal even in the absence of adequate funds, to increase an exchange of scholars and students between both countries, and to focus on empirical research more than on abstract theoretical research.

The workshop ended with Tanka B. Subba's (North Eastern Hill University, Shillong) valedictory address, in which he raised three important points to be addressed by scholars studying the Himalayas: (1) the inbuilt tendency of "home grown Orientalism" among practitioners from within, (2) the unresolved dilemma of subject-object dualism in social science research, and (3) the language of the social sciences (implying statist language, subaltern narration, *bahunbadi* (Brahmanical) discourses, gendered idioms, post-national expressions, and so on). In his note of thanks, Swatahsiddha

Sarkar, the workshop coordinator, also noted the possibility of holding at least two similar workshops or conferences covering such areas like Indian Himalaya and Tibet-Bhutan Himalaya in the coming two years. The workshop formally ended with the screening of an award-winning documentary film, *Voices of Teesta*, and a discussion with the filmmaker, Minket Lepcha, followed by a short presentation by Minket Lepcha and her team on performative folk art forms in the eastern Himalayas.

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