



March 2020

2019 Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya

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Recommended Citation

Wong, Pearly. 2020. 2019 Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya. *HIMALAYA* 39(2). Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol39/iss2/17>



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Conference Reports

2019 Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya

**Kathmandu, Nepal
24-26 July 2019**

Organized jointly by Social Science Baha, the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS), the Britain-Nepal Academic Council, the Center for Himalayan Studies-CNRS, and the Nepal Academic Network (Japan), the 8th Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya took place on 24-26 July 2019 in Hotel Shanker in Kathmandu, Nepal. The conference brought together 50 presentations organized into 18 panels, with two concurrent panels held during three sessions on each of the three days of the conference. The panellists comprised academicians from in and out of Nepal, researchers, activists, policy makers, as well as NGO and INGO professionals. The presentations represent diverse fields of Anthropology, History, Sociology, Economics, Political Science, Education, Law, Gender Studies, Development Studies, Child and Youth Studies, Health, Urban Planning, Linguistics, and History. Recurrent themes include those related to the changes in the region, the aftermath of the 2015 Nepal earthquake, as well as those related to gender and caste.

The conference opened with the panel “Urban Growth: Change and Livelihood.” Thomas Robertson (Fulbright Nepal) provided an

insight into the rapid changes of land-use, water, and public space in Kathmandu since the 1950s. Dipak Adhikari (Patan Multiple Campus) explored the relationship between informal economy and poverty reduction in Nepal, by examining how different variables, such as labor input, education level, and more, relate to income of street vendors in Kathmandu. Sanjay Sharma (National University of Singapore) presented an interesting account on the political economy of brickmaking in Nepal, detailing the different parties and their power relationship involved in the industry. A concurrent panel, also speaking to the theme of change and loss, was constituted of Abha Lal, who proposed that nostalgia for the Monarchy serves as a discursive tool for critique of recent political developments, Bryony Whitmarsh (University of Portsmouth), who argued that the Narayanhiti Palace Museum encouraged reflective nostalgia among the visitors, and Stefanie Lotter (SOAS), who explored various practices of memorialization after the 2015 Nepal earthquake.

Perpetuating the relevance of “change,” the panel “Borders and Boundaries” examined the effect of changing socio-political realities on communities in the borderland, particularly on economic practices of the Loba people from Upper Mustang by Yangchen Dolker and Khem Shresh (Social Science Baha), and “Muslimness” in the case of Gorkha Muslims and Tibetan

Muslims in Darjeeling, India, by Anup Chakraborty (Netaji Institute of Asian Studies). In addition, a presentation by Pearly Wong (University of Wisconsin-Madison) proposed looking at “convenience” as an important way of understanding people’s experience of change and development. Shobhit Shakya (Tallinn University of Technology) reported on “pseudo-guthis” among Newari diaspora, specifically on the effectiveness of their function, and to the extent they adhere or diverge from the features of traditional guthis.

There were three panels explicitly focusing on the theme of disaster. The first panel comprising Binu Limbu (independent researchers), Manoj Suji (Social Science Baha), and Micheal Hutt (SOAS) critically examined Nepal’s post-earthquake reconstruction process, financialization and the impact of the earthquake on the Nepali constitution respectively. In the second panel, Mark Lietchty (University of Illinois) argued for rethinking the understandings of disaster causation using a perspective of “contingent possibilities.” John Whelpton (Chinese University of Hong Kong) examined how earlier smaller earthquakes from 1934 onward affected popular consciousness on vulnerability and preventive measures. And finally, Jeevan Baniya (Social Science Baha) traced emerging discourses related to relief, recovery and reconstruction

through analysis of op-ed articles published in five major national daily newspapers in Nepal. The third panel involved a paper examining potential indicators for disaster-resilience in Nepal by Jinglu Song (Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University) and his team, as well as a presentation on the effectiveness of aid distribution to people with disabilities by Sapana Bista (Liverpool John Moores University) and her team.

The issues of gender and caste were addressed in ten presentations from seven panels. Among these include Stefanie Lotter (SOAS) and her team who examined the diversity of stigmas and taboos on menstruation, Yasuko Fujikura's (Kyoto University) ethnographic details on how Badi women struggle to transform their marginality by changing their reproductive strategies, and Sanjay Sharma's (National University of Singapore) narrative on the mobility of "Gurkha Women," who were otherwise invisible in historical narratives. An engaging panel focusing on Nepali women was especially worth mentioning. It presented Pritisha Shrestha's (Syracuse University) rhetoric analysis of Yogmaya Neupane—Nepal's own human rights activist in the early twentieth century, an innovative research by Pooja Chaudhary (Nepal Bar Association) and her team on the prevalence of sexual relationships during menstruation to challenge the hypocrisy of the 'untouchable' notion, and Amar BK's (University of Pittsburgh) intimate accounts on the suffering of urban women in Nepal.

In relation to caste, Krishna Adhikari (Britain-Nepal Academic Council) and his team analyzed Dalits' representation in school curricula and debated whether and at what stage should the Dalit issue be introduced to school children; Mitra

Pariyar (Kingston University) argued that religious conversion by Dalits is a means to effectively escape untouchability throughout their life cycles; Richard Bownas (University of Northern Colorado) detailed the instruments he used to measure caste discrimination in urban and rural Nepal and some insights from those findings.

In addition, there were two papers focusing on children and childhood. Jeevan Baniya (Social Science Baha) and his team showed the disproportionate effects of disasters on children, while Nabin Maharjan and Richard Mitchell (Brock University), through a case study of Lalitpur Metropolitan City Child Clubs in Nepal, called for a transdisciplinary approach that re-integrates epistemologies from the Global South to understand childhood.

Other panellists addressed policymaking in diverse fields. For instance, in the field of development, Manoj Suji, Nilima Rai and Sambriddhi Kharel (Social Science Baha) examined the frustrations and obstacles faced by actors involved in translating the 2030 Agenda for Gender Equality into the national discourse; Shangrila Joshi (Evergreen State College) examined the effects of neoliberal climate change policy such as REDD+ and Clean Development Mechanism on communities in Nepal; Ravindra Nyaupane (Swansea University) and his team analysed the issues of community-led tourism through the example of Dhorpatan. In the field of education, Shak Budhathoki (Mercy Corps Nepal), Toya Bhattarai (Kathmandu University), and Bhim Regmi (Tribhuvan University) respectively analysed the implementation of the School Improvement Plan, the evolution of the medium of education in Nepal, and the official language policy of Nepal. In the

field of health, a research team from HERD International presented the problems and prospects of using data for decision-making in local health systems in Nepal, while Sauharda Rai (University of Washington) and his team analysed the benefits and potential harms of service user participation in the field of Global Mental Health. There were also papers focusing on legislators' engagement in policy-making in the Nepalese Parliament by Sanjaya Mahato (Independent researcher) and his team, analysis on help-seeking behaviour of domestic violence survivors from the criminal justice system by Samjhana Shakya (University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences), and recommendations to address sexual assault cases in Nepal through a forensic lens by Lata Gautam (Anglia Ruskin University) and her team.

In relation to post-conflict rehabilitation, Chiranjibi Bhandari (Tribhuvan University) examined the challenges of reintegrating ex-combatants and Sara Bertotti (SOAS) demonstrated that "law is a limited language in translating hopes and expectations" of the 2016 Peace Accord of Nepal.

Also notable are the panel "Dignity Without Danger," convened by Sara Parker (Liverpool John Moores University), which explored the challenges of collaborative action research, and a presentation by Aidan Seale-Feldman (University of Virginia) who argued for a different ontological understanding of hysteria. She argued that the Nepali indigenous concept of *chopne*—being taken over by spirits or ghosts, is a relational affliction, which is unlike the typical psychosocial explanation of conversion disorder that traces the source of the problem to the individual.

Finally, there are a few papers which did not fit in the categories mentioned above. These include two papers that historicize the subalterns, i.e., Amanda Taylor, Claire Basnet, and Martin Brooks's (SOAS) retelling of the colonial encounter in the Himalaya, drawing from the oral traditions of Nyshi people in Tali in Arunachal Pradesh, and Nokmedemla Lemtur's (Georg-August Universitat Gottingen) historical account on how mountaineering expedition to Everest and Nanga Parbat between 1922-1939 created a distinct specialized labour pool. Besides, Sesc Ma (Kyoto University) innovatively followed individual dogs in Langtang to understand their relationship with humans and non-humans alike and challenged the usual conceptualization and categorization of animals. Tek Bahadur Dong (OneSeed Expeditions) presented an ethnographic study on the interaction of homestay families and tourists in Rasuwa, Nepal, while Harsha Man Maharjan (Martin Chautari), through his analysis of social media in relation to a procurement controversy, suggested that "demarcation between media accountability and violence against media houses and journalists has become blurred."

Overall, the papers in the conference were of high quality. Each session was well attended, and some sparked very lively debates. The diverse audience and presenters involved enabled constructive discussions and exchange of viewpoints. The adequate size of the conference and sufficient time allocation was noteworthy as it allowed attendees to thoroughly engage in meaningful discussion.

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