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5th Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network (ABRN)

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Conference Reports

5th Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network (ABRN)

Kathmandu, Nepal

12–14 December 2016

The 5th Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network (ABRN) took place in Kathmandu, Nepal on December 12–14, 2016. Hosted at the Hotel Annapurna, the conference was organized by the Social Science Baha, the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), and the ABRN. This bi-annual summit brought together over 200 international scholars from across the globe, making it the largest ABRN conference to date. Disciplinary approaches from both the humanities and social sciences included, but were not limited to Anthropology, Archaeology, Art History, Cultural Studies, Development, Economics, Environmental Studies, Gender Studies, Geography, History, International Studies, Political Science, Postcolonial Studies, Religious Studies, Sociology, and Urban Studies. The theme of this year's conference was 'Dynamic Borderlands: Livelihoods, Communities and Flows,' with a special focus on maritime borders, high-altitude borderlands, borderlands with a high risk of natural disaster, and nomadic and migratory communities. Panels and roundtables addressed a range of different topics, from hydropower in the Himalayas to maritime

circulations in Southeast Asia to the militarization of borderlands across the region to family and gender in trans-national contexts.

Nepal and Himalayan studies were particularly well represented at the conference. Given this year's venue in Nepal, many Nepali scholars were able to present their work and attend the many panels addressing issues of regional interest. Of the forty plus panels that took place over the three-day conference, over a dozen were focused or included presentations on Nepal and Himalayan studies. The panel 'Chimeric Borderlands in, of, and for Northeast India' pushed forward the idea of a new ecology of borders through Carlo Severi's notion of the 'chimeric imagination' in historical and ethnographic contexts throughout the Indian northeast. Papers in the panel 'Borderland Roads: Pathways and Passages' analyzed road projects in Nepal, Northwest Yunnan, and the Indian northeast. In the panel 'New Border Alignments and the State,' Babika Khawas and Swatahsiddha Sarkar (University of North Bengal) presented a paper on the India–Nepal border based on the analysis of literary texts, films, and songs. The panel 'Cross-Border Livelihoods' presented three papers on Nepal that focused, respectively, on violence in Siraha, restrictions to cross-border mobility in Dolpo, and trans-Himalayan linkages in Lapchi. The panel 'Borderland Representations and Memory' included three papers on highland communities

at the Mizoram–Myanmar border, Tawang in northeast India, and Walungchung gola in Nepal. A more historical perspective on a number of Himalayan borderlands was offered by participants in the panel 'Carving Boundaries of Exclusion and Inclusion: Colonial and Contemporary Trajectories.' The double panel 'Transboundary Environments in the Himalaya Flows of Resources, Representations and Practices' focused on the flow of resources, representations, and practices through which transboundary environments are produced in the Himalayas over time. The panel 'Production and Transformations in Cultural Borderlands: Views from In and Out of Nepal' concentrated on Kathmandu as productive site of cultural practices. Sunita Basnet (University of Waikato) presented a paper on Bhutanese refugees in New Zealand in the panel 'Forced Across Borders: Research on Displaced and Resettled South Asian Migrants.' The double panel 'Cross-Border Trade in Environmental Products: The Dynamics of Production Networks and Livelihoods' included seven papers on the medicinal plant trade in Nepal. Papers in the panel 'Intersecting Highland Boundaries: Vernacularized Modernities and Livelihoods Reconstruction' focused on trans-Himalayan dynamics and cross-border practices, such as a discussion on Buddhist modernity in the Tibetan world. The panel 'Border Issues along with the Hindu Kush and Himalayas' examined long-lasting

border disputes from an historical perspective. In the panel 'Energy and Borderlands: Mapping the Himalayan Hydropower Frontier,' presenters discussed three hydropower projects in Nepal, namely in the Arun valley, upper Karnali and Rasuwa. The panel 'Redimensioning the Border: Volume, Materiality, Terrain' included a paper by Tina Harris (University of Amsterdam) on the Pakistan-India-China border interface, as well as a paper by Nayanika Mathur (University of Sussex) on animal smuggling in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand in northern India. The panel 'The 'Untameable' Highlanders: 'Then' and 'Now' of Trans-Border Mobility in India's North-East' explored borders as zones of interactions through an extensive chronological span encompassing both the colonial and the post-colonial. Issues of belonging and citizenship in Nepal were, on the other hand, at the center of the double panel 'Territorial Flows: Life along Nepal's Southern Border and Beyond.' Finally, papers on the India-China border dispute and China's new Silk Road initiative in the region were presented in the panel 'South Asian Borderlands: Conflict or Cooperation?.'

In addition to these programs particularly focused on Nepal and Himalayan studies, the conference also featured three special events: a keynote speech by Patricia Uberoi (Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi), a lecture by Sanjib Baruah (Bard College), and a photo exhibition by Andrzej Markiewicz, Dolly Kikon, and Bengt G. Karlsson. Uberoi's keynote speech, entitled "Gender, Trade and New Connectivities: Reflections on India's Northeastern Borderlands," showed that, despite the renewed interest in large-scale projects of trans-national connectivity, most notably China's One Belt One Road, the gender dimension is always

absent from all discussions on the topic of infrastructural development in Asia's borderlands. Despite women's prominence in trading practices along several routes of so-called 'economic corridors' (a recent and 'slippery' concept, according to Uberoi), their role has not yet been given the attention it deserves. While 'win-win' outcomes are often taken for granted within these projects, Uberoi suggested, it is also fundamental for social scientists to think about who will be left out. Sanjib Baruah's lecture also focused on northeast India, particularly on the applicability of the notion(s) of frontier. The lecture, "Bringing the Frontier Back in: Borderland Studies and Northeast India," offered a fascinating account of a region attempting to bring together the conceptual lenses of a settlement frontier, resource frontier, and geographical frontier into what Baruah called a "constellation." The lecture was followed by a performance by Ronid Chingangbam, a musician from Imphal, Manipur, whose songs drew a caustic view of daily life at India's northwestern frontier. The photo exhibition, on the other hand, emerged from a collaboration between anthropologists Dolly Kikon and Bengt G. Karlsson and photographer Andrzej Markiewicz, with the purpose of tracing the lives of indigenous migrants from the borderlands of northeast India.

The 5th Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network was a great success for both Asian border studies writ large and the community of Nepal and Himalayan studies. In a historical moment where borders, walls, and migrants are a constant subject of news headlines and public discussions, the production of critical knowledge and cross-disciplinary dialogue addressing these issues have become of paramount importance.

The ABRN conference has been an important moment of reflection and discussion, and the hope is certainly for such conversations to be further elaborated in the future.

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