

## **Conference Report on The Agenda of Transformation: Inclusion in Nepali Democracy, Kathmandu, 24-26 April 2003**

by Sara Shneiderman and Mark Turin

Organised by Social Science Baha, a newly-founded Nepali institution established to support social science research, *The Agenda of Transformation: Inclusion in Nepali Democracy* was the first academic conference of its kind held in Nepal.

The organising committee of the conference consisted of Deepak Thapa, Novel Kishore Rai, Kanak Mani Dixit, Rajendra Pradhan and Santa Bahadur Pun. They aimed to bring together Nepali, South Asian and overseas scholars to address diverse topics relating to the makeup of Nepali society, the structure of the polity, and the nature of political participation. The hope was that a “clear understanding [will] emerge on the way ahead for the country”. The result was that for three days at the end of April 2003, scholars from a wide range of disciplines gathered to address matters of representation and pluralism in Nepal. The event was eagerly anticipated by those presenting papers, since the forum was explicitly designed to allow academics to share their thoughts with policy makers, politicians and interested members of the public.

The conference was designed with several elements in mind, including keynote addresses, plenary sessions and panels. The opening plenary was offered by Harka Gurung. Entitled *Trident and thunderbolt: Culture dynamics in Nepalese politics*, Gurung’s lecture (the first in the Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture Series) was disappointing, being as stoic in delivery as it was predictable in content. Relying heavily on familiar and publicly-available statistical data, the speaker outlined clearly the structural inequalities on which modern Nepal is founded. Although this may have been useful for newcomers, either to Nepal or sociological discussion, Gurung did not provide a compelling or fresh vision to sufficiently engage the specialist audience present.

The working sessions, always two in parallel, started after the plenary. Their structure was well-conceived: three speakers presented for 20 minutes each, after which questions were collected and answered in batches. This format led to genuine, open discussion, often heated and always engaging. At all conferences, however, the parallel session structure invariably frustrates some of the participants. It is hard to evaluate the totality of a conference if one has only been able to attend, by definition, half of the sessions. Consequently, many participants used coffee and tea breaks to establish what they had missed next door. While a longer conference with no parallel sessions would have permitted all attendees to hear each paper, a six-day event of this kind would have been

harder for many scholars to justify.

Panel and plenary themes included social, cultural and economic exclusion, theoretical perspectives, structures and visions, inclusion at the grassroots, politics of language, inclusion in regional space, women in Nepali democracy, and institutional exclusion. We cannot review all of the contributions here, but suffice it to say that a wide range of important and controversial topics were addressed.

The integrity and inclusiveness of several previous academic conferences on Nepal has been undermined by the absence of a representative number of local scholars. To the credit of the organisers of *Agenda of Transformation*, South Asian scholars presented in every working session and significantly outnumbered international contributors. While the originality of the content and the quality of presentation were naturally mixed, nevertheless all participants should be commended for genuinely attempting to grapple with the problem at hand: how to expand inclusion in the Nepali polity.

Panel discussions often continued outside during lunch hour on the lawn of the conference centre. It was clear that the international, interdisciplinary connections imagined by the organisers were not only initiated, but strengthened in ways that would extend beyond the conference itself. This collegial atmosphere was emphasised by an evening showing of Toni Hagen's film, *Utile ko Nepāl*. Re-edited by members of Himal Association, this delightful journey through 1950s Nepal was received with laughter and good spirit.

The closing plenary was a memorable event, with three of Nepal's most articulate and formidable voices: Anup Pahari, Seira Tamang and Hari Roka. All three spoke with clarity and comfort (although only Roka spoke in Nepali) of their visions for a more inclusive Nepal. The presence of more political activists-cum-scholars, not to mention active politicians, would have been appreciated, given that they are often better versed in public speaking than cautious academics.

Although an overall success, it would not be right to conclude this report without mentioning a few notable failings. It is lamentable that a conference on 'inclusion' should be limited to a small group of established commentators, and held in a building as overbearing as the Birendra International Convention Centre, when a more intimate and collegial setting would have been more suitable. Furthermore, the lack of systematic translation into Nepali of papers delivered in English (in fact, only Nepali papers were translated into English), combined with the absence of more women, young scholars, and radical or unconventional voices - both Nepali and foreign - paradoxically made the conference quite exclusive.

Nevertheless, the conference and its organisers must be loudly applauded for staging the first event of its kind in Nepal: an open forum for sharing information and debating controversial issues across disciplinary boundaries.

The publication promises to be an important contribution, and a Nepali language edition would be very worthwhile. Finally, a well-designed website houses the abstracts of all the papers presented as well as further information on the conference and the Social Science Baha. It can be found at:

[www.himalassociation.org/baha/nepalidemocracy](http://www.himalassociation.org/baha/nepalidemocracy)

### **Report on the Conference *Nepal – Current State of Research and Perspectives* held in memory of Prof. Bernhard Kölver in June 2003 in Leipzig**

By Alexander von Rospatt

A conference on Nepalese studies was held at Leipzig, Germany from June 19th to 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003. It was organized by the Institute of Indian and Central Asian Studies at the University of Leipzig in commemoration of Prof. Bernhard Kölver (1938-2001), who had been chair of that Institute until 2001. Prof. Kölver has been one of the foremost scholars in Nepalese studies since 1970 when he came to Nepal as the first director of the Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project. As coordinator of the Nepal research programme (Forschungsschwerpunkt) funded by the German Research Council (DFG) from 1980 to 1990 he was one of the key figures to promote inter-disciplinary approaches to research on Nepal. The agenda of the Leipzig conference was very much in accordance with the kind of studies he supported and to which he dedicated so much of his life. Moreover, the organizers felt that after the dramatic changes undergone by Nepal during the years since the establishment of democracy in 1990, the time had come to take account of these changes and assess how they have affected Nepalese studies. The conference was especially meant to serve as a platform for discussing ideas and experiences and for developing new perspectives of inter-disciplinary cooperation on an international level.

The Conference brought together indologists, anthropologists, historians, geographers, linguists, art historians, sociologists, ethno-musicologists and tibetologists from Nepal, Europe and the U.S. While many of the invited scholars had participated in the aforementioned Nepal research programme of the DFG, there were also numerous other scholars, most of them representing a new generation who were drawn into the field of Nepalese studies more recently. In addition to the 29 scholars who read papers, there were 13 further official participants, among them Dr Ulrike Kölver, the wife of the late Prof. Kölver, who herself is a renowned scholar of Newari lexicography and linguistics. Furthermore, a small but enthusiastic group of students from Leipzig and other parts of Germany had congregated for the event. The venue of