

CONFERENCE REPORT

Report on the Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya 2012

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The inaugural edition of the Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya was held in Kathmandu from 18 to 22 July, 2012. Co-hosted by the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS), Britain-Nepal Academic Council (BNAC) and Social Science Baha (SSB), the conference was divided into three segments. The first part was devoted to 'Inequality and Affirmative Action: Situating Nepal in Global Debates'; the second consisted of papers that focused broadly on Nepal and the Himalaya; and the third was a policy dialogue on the subject of ayurveda and medicinal plant conservation.

The conference on affirmative action recognised the need to address inequality arising from various historical and social processes. It provided a venue for an exchange of ideas as well as open discussions on inequality and affirmative action among academics, policy-makers and activists. The conference came at an opportune moment since Nepal has been planning the historic exercise of state restructuring which is meant to lead towards a more equitable future for the country.

The first two days consisted of closed sessions, with keynote presentations in the evenings open to the public. Researchers and experts from Nepal and elsewhere presented 22 papers that dealt with the concept, nature and production/perpetuation of inequality along with analyses of attempts at addressing the issue through various policy measures. Keynote presentations were made by Ashwini Deshpande (University of Delhi), Glenn C. Loury (Brown University), Marc Galanter (University of Wisconsin) and Hilary Silver (Brown University). The third day was open to the public, and consisted of three panels in which nine papers were presented for a more general audience, with a separate panel organised in the evening for policy-makers and political leaders.

All the papers recognised the societal harm caused by inequality and looked at attempts at addressing inequality through affirmative action programmes. While the papers agreed that the existence of inequality in society has been universally acknowledged, they differed on the causes of

inequality and measures (to be) taken to address it. There was also general agreement that inequality results either from political design or from geographic, cultural and religious locations in society, not to mention factors such as ethnicity and gender.

In the context of Nepal, the conference highlighted how inequality became institutionalised with the promulgation of the Muluki Ain of 1854, which divided the Nepali society along the Hindu caste hierarchy, and created identity-based social categories. It was argued that marginalisation had resulted as much from regional/geographic and ethnic inequality as from a deliberate policy of neglect by the state. The centrality of the state was highlighted in all the papers, be it in producing and/or perpetuating inequality, or through its role in correcting these wrongs.

The papers also shed light on the ways in which inequality affects different groups differently. Since marginalisation and discrimination are merely two facets of inequality, the consequences of inequality are felt to be ultimately tied to social identity, leading to lack of control over and access to power, property and resources, which negatively affects the capability of the individuals, and results in under-representation of certain castes and groups/communities in the job market and state mechanisms.

Addressing inequality through various policy measures, either as a public good or as redressal for historical wrongs, were discussed in many of the papers. While some argued that equality was something to be desired of all humans, others focused on addressing inequality as reparation for historical wrongs that had led to the marginalisation and exclusion of many members of society. The three main arguments on why inequality needs to be addressed were: it will bridge the gap created by social marginalisation which lead to disparities in skill acquisition, and, consequently, in socio-economic status; it will ensure representation of the marginalised and include them in societal processes from which they are currently excluded; and, it will eventually result in greater social integration.

Various benefits of and strategies for affirmative action were discussed based on experiences from other countries. The flipside of affirmative action has been seen in India, where it has been implemented in the form of reservations in many spheres of public life. But, it has also led to stigmatisation of the process itself, stemming from the fact that although

victims of inequality have unequal bases to start with, and because it involves preferential valuation of social identity, the enhanced access to productive opportunities for these target groups cannot be achieved without lowering standards and/or distorting human capital decisions. Another issue plaguing affirmative action measures is the apprehension of those who have not benefited from such policies, often leading to a 'us vs them' divide in societies where implemented.

The fourth day of the conference, 21 July, was dedicated to a series of panels where the presentations focused on transition and transformation of the Himalayan region. A total of 27 papers were presented in 16 parallel sessions. While some of the papers focused on stability and stagnation as the main features of the present transition of Nepal; others charted changes in Nepal's diversity, culture, formation of identity and resistance using the media. Other themes closely related to the transition were non-electoral representation, and local democracy and governance. A series of papers focused on policy research in the fields of climate and the link and conflict between biodiversity and livelihood, highlighting traditional knowledge systems of local farming practices and ethnobotany.

The last day of the conference was devoted to a policy dialogue among researchers on 'Health and Nature: A Policy Dialogue on Ayurveda and Medicinal Plant Conservation'. This event brought together stakeholders from both the government and the private sector, as well as researchers and natural health-care practitioners working in the still largely separate institutions of indigenous health-care and environmental conservation.