

Report on the Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya 2013

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The second edition of the Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya was held in Kathmandu from 24 to 26 July 2013. Co-hosted by Social Science Baha (SSB), the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS) and Britain-Nepal Academic Council (BNAC), the conference saw 21 papers presented in eight panels over three days, two keynote presentations and a panel discussion.

The first day of the conference began with opening remarks from the Chair of Social Science Baha, Nirmal Man Tuladhar. The inaugural panel discussed the historical epochs in Nepal and their impact on various aspects of development. The first paper, by Sudhindra Sharma (Interdisciplinary Analysts) and Bandana Gyawali Gautam (University of Helsinki), looked into development during the Rana period, especially in terms of forestry management and domestic water supply. Lok Ranjan Parajuli's (Martin Chautari) paper also explored the Rana regime's 'policy turnaround' with the introduction of what was called Basic Education, which itself was replaced by 'modern education' with the 1951 political change. The third paper, by Thomas Robertson (Worcester Polytechnic Institute), examined, first, the epidemiology, entomology, ecology and geography of malaria, and then the impact of malaria on Nepal's history in addition to the ways in which Nepalis influenced the disease before efforts to eradicate malaria began in the 1950s.

The second panel had an exclusive focus on Nepali youth. Andrea Kölbl (University of Oxford) looked at the level of involvement of educated Nepali youth in civic activities. Shrochis Karki (University of Oxford) gave an overview of a school in the outskirts of Lalitpur district with an exemplary record in the SLC examination and outlined the possible reasons behind the success. Finally, Amanda Snellinger (University of Oxford) analysed the process leading to the formulation of Nepal's National Youth Policy in 2010. The third panel of the day had two papers focusing loosely on the issue of labour. Christie Lai Ming Lam (Osaka University) inspected changes in gender relations among Rana Tharus of Far-Western Nepal in

the context of the migration of male members for labour and its impact on the status of women. The paper by Sanjay Sharma (Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility) looked more at the political economy of migration by examining the causes for migration vis-à-vis 'Rational Choice Theory'.

The first day concluded with a keynote presentation by Michael Hutt (SOAS) on 'Five Nepali Novels'. He analysed five Nepali novels published between 2005 and 2010: Narayan Wagle's *Palpasa Café*, Narayan Dhakal's *Pretakalpa*, and Krishna Dharabasi's *Radha*, Yug Pathak's *Urgenko Ghoda* and Buddhisagar Chapagain's *Karnali Blues*. The presentation, moderated by Abhi Subedi (Tribhuvan University), briefly summarised the aforementioned books, charted the trajectory of the political conflict through social changes as reflected in the writings, and finally questioned if, through its expanded readership, Nepali literature had finally become 'popular'.

The second day began with a panel examining the community. Sudeep Jana Thing (Curtin University) and Christopher Butler (University of California Santa Cruz) looked at the impacts on a community in terms of usage of natural resources while Soma Kumari Rana and Shiva Kumar Shrestha's (SSMP/HELVETAS) paper touched upon the opportunities and challenges of community mobilisation in the field of agriculture. The next panel focused on Nepali culture. Gerard Toffin's (CNRS) paper provided a macro perspective of changes in the caste system in post-conflict Nepal. The second paper by Kanako Nakagawa (Kwansei Gakuin University) focused on a sub-caste of the Newars, the Khadgis, and examined their lifestyle in connection to their traditional occupations as butchers. Ajaya N. Mali (Nepā School of Social Sciences and Humanities) looked at modern life in Kathmandu using Henri Lefebvre's interpretation of alienation and the festival. The final panel of the day picked on diverse characteristics of conflict. Khem R. Shreesh and Sudhindra Sharma's (Interdisciplinary Analysts) paper examined various facets of Nepal's post-conflict political economy, including demographic characteristics, foreign employment and remittance, foreign trade and GDP, in relation to Paul Collier's concept of conflict traps. The second presentation, by Sujeet K. Karn (University of Hull), took on the paradigm of grief resulting from death and bereavement as a direct result of the decade-long civil conflict in Nepal.

The second keynote of the conference was by Mahendra Lawoti (Western Michigan University) on 'Democracy in Trouble? Political Elite's Attitude and Behaviour and Regime Instability in Nepal' and moderated

by Hira Vishwakarma (well-known Dalit activist). The lecture investigated the attitudes of the Nepali elite with regard to the consolidation of democracy in Nepal. Based on structured interviews with 101 (out of 265) legislators conducted in 2000, the presentation also looked at the variables that could have an impact upon tolerance, and, subsequently, the sustenance of democracy in Nepal.

The first panel on the third day centred on the theme of collective identity in the varied contexts of ethnicity, with Pauline Limbu placing *kipat* within the Limbuwan movement, and Gregory Pierce's (Lund University) paper examining the meanings of being a Dolpo resident. The last panel of the conference looked at diverse women's issues. Joanna Morrison (University College London), Aman Sen and Rita Thapa (Mother and Infant Research Activities) took up women's role in improving neonatal health of the mother and the new-born in Dhanusha and Makwanpur districts. Vikas Paudel (Mother and Infant Research Activities) looked at the impact of nutritional behaviour on women's health in Dhanusha, and, finally, Dhruva B. Khatri (Prithvi Narayan Campus) presented a Pokhara-based case study about violence against women. Michael Hutt, Chair of the Britain-Nepal Academic Council, provided the concluding remarks on behalf of the organisers.

The last event of the conference was a panel discussion on the 'Strategic Plan for the Proposed Social Science Research Council in Nepal' by Pitamber Sharma, Bal Gopal Baidya and Dwarika Nath Dhungel. The lead author of the report, Pitamber Sharma, made a presentation summarising the report, which consisted of a brief overview of the status of social sciences in Nepal, the overall context for the need for such a council, and a comparative analysis based on practices and lessons learnt from other countries around the world. Sharma then elaborated on the various facets of the strategic plan for the formation of this 'apex institution devoted to the promotion and support of quality research in the social sciences'. The commentators, Kathryn S. March (Columbia University) and Pratyoush Onta (Martin Chautari), spoke along the lines for the proposed SSRC to limit token political participation, and explore possibilities of delegating to and/or collaborating with existing institutions. David Gellner (University of Oxford) moderated the discussions that followed.

Overall, the conference brought together a mix of national and international scholars, working on various themes connected to Nepal. This

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annual event is gradually providing a crucial platform for not just the dissemination of research papers but also in creating an understanding of the issues that are currently relevant and being investigated by various researchers.

Panel, paper titles and abstracts from the conference can be viewed at: soscbaha.org/conference-2013/kac2013.html

