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# Annual Conference on South Asia, Madison, WI, 17-19 October 2014

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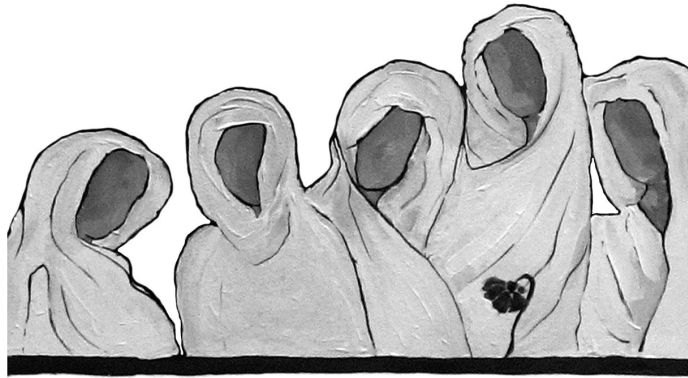
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# Conference Report



## *Annual Conference on South Asia*

**Madison, WI  
17-19 October 2014**

The 43rd Annual Conference on South Asia took place in Madison, WI over the long weekend of 16-19 October 2014. Hosted at the downtown Madison Concourse Hotel, the conference was convened by the Center for South Asia at the University of Wisconsin-Madison under the direction of Dr. Stephen Young, Professor of Geography and International Affairs at UW-Madison. This annual summit brought together nearly 700 international scholars from across the globe, comprising a wide array of disciplinary backgrounds with common interests and expertise across South Asia. Disciplinary approaches from both the humanities and social sciences included, but not were limited to Anthropology, Archaeology, Art History, Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies, Demography, Development, Economics, Environmental Studies, Film Studies, Gender Studies, Geography, History, International Studies, Journalism and Media Studies, Linguistics, Philosophy, Political Science, Postcolonial Studies, Religious Studies, Sociology, and Urban Studies. Building upon this diversity of methodological and analytical perspectives, participants represented the numerous regional and national sub-disciplines that constitute South Asian Studies, such as Himalayan, Sri Lankan, and Hindustan Studies, to name only a few.

Nepali and Himalayan Studies were particularly well represented at the 2015 Annual Conference on South Asia. Although scholars of Nepal and the wider Himalaya have often found themselves on the geographic and academic margins of South Asian Studies, this year a significant number of panels, presentations, film screenings, and meetings represented the robust and rigorous scholarship of Nepali and Himalayan Studies. Together, these sessions and activities demonstrate that the international and inter-disciplinary research comprising Nepali and Himalayan Studies has reached a critical mass that is simultaneously at the forefront of South Asian Studies and a vanguard of research that exceeds disciplinary and regional boundary-making within the academy.

Of the approximately 100 panels that took place over the conference weekend, nearly one dozen were focused on or included presentations in Nepali and Himalayan Studies. In chronological order, these panels included a double session in political ecology on “People and Environment in the Himalaya;” “Preservation, Transformation, (Re) Invention: Pre-Modern Tradition in the Century,” which focused on religious practices primarily in Nepal and the Himalayan region; “Interrogating Infrastructure 2.0: Roads and the Politics of Development in the Himalaya;” “Caste in Nepal and Overseas;” “Spaces of Kathmandu;” “Marriage, Globalization, and Social

Change in Nepal;” “Development and Civil Society,” which included a paper on Bhutanese refugees in Nepal; two presentations on development and social politics in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam in “Re-visioning Northeast India: Identities, Development, and Environment,” two presentations on Nepali politics in “Electoral Politics and the Condition of Democracy in South Asia,” and two presentations on the cultural politics of *dalit* in Nepal in the session “Rethinking Caste.”

In addition to these programs particularly focused in Nepali and Himalayan Studies, the Conference also featured a number of exciting and informative events outside of the many panel and roundtable sessions. Beginning with a Preconference on Thursday, 16 October, these events included multiple regional studies association meetings, the public demonstration of a Tibetan sand *mandala* by monks from Sera Je Secondary School in Karnataka, India, and the photo exhibit opening for *Bhopal: The Tragedy Continues* by Lewis Koch that documents the tragic legacy of the Union Carbide Plant disaster in Bhopal, India. Additional artistic, academic, and cultural events throughout the weekend also included a book publishers’ exhibition highlighting the newest texts across disciplines and regions of South Asian Studies as well as a special event on *The Legend of Ponnivala* by Professor Brenda Beck.

Numerous other film screenings, book readings, and exhibitions took

place throughout the weekend. These include a screening of award-winning filmmaker Pankaj Rishi Kumar's *In God's Land*, the 2014 South Asian Book Award Ceremony held at the Madison Public Library, a photo exhibit on *The Ramlila in Pandit Radheshyams Bareilly (and other venues, big and small)* by Pamela Lothspeich, and a dramatic reading of *Harvest* by Manjula Padmanabhan. Finally, P. Sainath and Jason Motlagh gave the Annual Conference on South Asia plenary address, titled *Breaking News: Exploring New Possibilities for Public Scholarship on South Asia*, on Saturday afternoon.

Amongst a retinue of distinguished scholars in attendance at the conference, two in particular stand out: Dr. Joe Elder and Dr. Craig Jeffrey. On Friday evening, following an all-conference happy hour and dinner, the Joseph W. Elder Memorial Lecture was presented by Dr. Craig Jeffrey, Professor at the School of Geography and the Environment at the University of Oxford. Dr. Jeffrey's talk, *Now! Youth Prefigurative Politics in India*, explored contemporary progressive social movements across youth populations in north India. In both his lecture and through current research projects, Dr. Jeffrey has argued for the "in the moment" role of improvisation for achieving social change today and into the future, particularly in the dynamic contexts of South Asia.

Fittingly, Professor Joe Elder was himself in attendance at the conference. A true 'Dean' of South Asian Studies from North America to South Asia and across the field of study abroad in the Indian Subcontinent and Himalaya, Professor Elder attended Nepal and Himalayan Studies panels on caste, modernity, and social politics in Nepal. The conference remains a great legacy and tribute to Professor Elder, and he expressed delight at the chance to once again

see many of his former disciples and students (including this reviewer) presenting new academic research and demonstrating social progress in an intellectual field which he played a formative role in cultivating.

The Annual Conference on South Asia also served as the time and place for the annual members' meeting of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies, as well as the annual meeting of the ANHS Executive Committee. The ANHS members' meeting included general updates from President Mary Cameron on the Association, membership status, fiscal health, and new journal subscription policies for *HIMALAYA*, fiscal and development updates from Steve Folmar, announcements and solicitations from Sienna Craig on upcoming publications of *HIMALAYA* in both print and electronic formats, updates on communications for online content and knowledge sharing from Heather Hindman, and the announcement of new Executive Committee members Pasang Sherpa and Galen Murton. The ANHS members' meeting also included announcements of the annual Dor Bahadur Bista prize for best graduate student paper, awarded to Jacob Rinck from Yale University for the paper "Land Reform, Social Change and Political Cultures in Nepal's Tarai." Additionally, it was announced that the next conference of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies—or HSC4—will be held at the University of Texas at Austin from 26 to 28 February 2016.

In conclusion, the 43rd Annual Conference on South Asia was a great success for both South Asian Studies writ large and the flourishing community of Nepali and Himalayan Studies. It is encouraging to witness the steady growth and global participation of scholars across generational and disciplinary lines at regionally focused

conferences such as this annual event at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. It is worth noting that at both academic conferences and beyond, Nepali and Himalayan Studies continues to demonstrate a unique ability to bring together scholars, activists, artists, policy makers, and development professionals in critical yet collegial dialogue. Moreover, as a young scholar relatively new to the field, it is particularly exciting to join the ranks of such a welcoming yet rigorous community of knowledge.

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