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Annual Conference on South Asia, Madison, WI, 22-25 October 2015

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Conference Reports

Annual Conference on South Asia

Madison, WI

22-25 October 2015

The 44th Annual Conference on South Asia was a phenomenal success with nearly 800 scholars from an array of disciplines and countries came together to discuss topics such as identity, social change, migration, the environment, health, and current policy. Held from October 22-25 at the Madison Concourse Hotel, the conference was organized by the Center for South Asia at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

For many Himalaya scholars, the conference began with Thursday's two Himalaya-focused preconference events: the day-long workshop entitled 'Darjeeling Histories, Politics, and Environments,' organized by Townsend Middleton (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) and Sara Shneiderman (University of British Columbia) and the Tenth Annual Himalayan Policy Research Conference, organized by the Nepal Study Center at the University of New Mexico. Megan Adamson Sijapati (Gettysburg College) also presented on Islam in Nepal during a preconference session focused on South Asian Islam.

Graduate students, junior scholars, and senior scholars engaged Nepal and the Himalaya in a collection of panels spanning the themes of post-earthquake Nepal, social identity,

road development, structure and agency, alternative healing practices, and religion. Three panels focused specifically on recent research on Nepal. 'The Social Politics of Identity, Mobility, and Development in the 21st Century' showcased new research by four recent Fulbright PhD and MA students on topics ranging from rice farming in Lamjung, to the impacts of rural roads, to gendered narratives of mobility. The roundtable 'Rethinking Structure, Agency and the History of Nepal' featured the work of visiting Fulbright scholar Chaitanya Mishra (Tribhuvan University) and debated issues of structure and agency from a sociological, anthropological, and historical perspective. Presenters in the panel 'The Earthquake in Nepal: Disciplinary Perspectives' presented numerous perspectives on the impact the April and May 2015 earthquakes had on Nepal, including an assessment of the damage to religious artifacts in the Kathmandu Valley and restoration efforts currently underway.

The work of several other Nepal scholars was also featured in non-Himalaya specific panels, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of Himalayan studies. In 'Environmental Studies from Sri Lanka to Nepal,' Tom Robertson (Worcester Polytechnic Institute) discussed the origins of Chitwan National Park and offered an assessment of whether it should be considered an example of 'fortress conservation,' while Mary Cameron (Florida Atlantic University) focused

on Ayurveda and biodiversity conservation in Nepal. Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) presented on Tantric-Brahmanical tensions in Nepal's goddess Svasthani tradition in the panel 'Iconographic Riddles: Goddesses and the Ambiguity of Form.' Sienna Craig (Dartmouth College) discussed questions about composing ethnographic life with respect to her work in Nepal in the panel 'Sharing the Field: Disciplinary Engagements Between Anthropology and Literature.' In 'The Royal State and Society,' Michael Baltutis (University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh) presented on the importance of displaying Indra's flag in eighteenth century Nepal and Anne Mocko (Concordia College) explored how Nepal's flawed royal succession of 2001 negatively impacted the royal dynasty.

Areas of the Himalaya outside of Nepal also received attention in numerous panels. Kashmir was featured in the roundtable 'Crises of Trust: Post-flood Deficits and Devastations in Kashmir Valley.' Danish Khan's and Kartik Misra's paper focused on re-conceptualizing the conflict of Kashmir in 'State Society Interactions in Modern South Asia: Implications for People's Mobilizations and State Actions,' and Dean Accardi (Connecticut College) offered insights into ascetic discourses and trans-religious community formation in early modern Kashmir in 'Re-defining

Religious Community: Shifting Boundaries, Strategies, and Sources of Authority in Early Modernity.' Panelists in 'Insurgency and Counter Insurgency in South Asia: Violent and Non-violent Strategies Used in the LTTE, Maoist, Punjab and Kashmir Insurgencies' raised pressing issues related to contemporary political crises in the Himalaya and surrounding regions.

Uttarakhand and the Indian Central Himalaya were also featured. The panel 'Regional Modernities in the Indian Central Himalaya' included four papers that highlighted different aspects of Uttarakhand and Uttarkhandi identity. Radhika Govindrajana (University of Washington) discussed migration and agrarian transformation in the Indian Central Himalaya in the panel 'New Intermediaries and Changing Regimes of Agricultural Production in India: Merchants, Agents, Buyers, and Village Leaders.' Shaho Tamding (Central University of Tibetan Studies) presented on a Himalayan stone pillar inscription as part of a panel on Buddhist art, history, and expression.

Two papers focused on Himalaya communities in exile. In 'Reflections from the Field: Methods and Research,' Kathryn Stam (SUNY Polytechnic Institute) presented on trust and identity for Bhutanese-Nepali Refugees in the U.S., and Swati Chawla (University of Virginia) discussed elections and the refashioning of Tibetan identity in exile.

Although each day of the conference included Himalaya-focused sessions, the upcoming 4th Himalayan Studies Conference (25-28 February 2016) may have nevertheless limited the number of Himalaya panels this year.

In addition to the many other non-Himalaya panels and roundtable

discussions, the conference also featured a thought-provoking keynote lecture, film screenings, and two distinguished authors who discussed the issue of trust in writing, as well as performance art pieces. The keynote address this year was given by Wendy Doniger (University of Chicago), a preeminent scholar of Hinduism. Nearly every conference participant seemed to be in attendance to hear Doniger discuss the influence of the textbook of politics (the *Arthashastra*) on the textbook of sexuality (the *Kamasutra*), as well as the subsequent influence of the *Kamasutra* on both the erotic literary traditions of India and on the *bhakti* tradition. Friday night's conference events did not wind down until nearly midnight, as participants first enjoyed a 'reading/song' performance by Tanuja Desai Hidier, and then danced the night away to Bollywood fusion spun by DJ Rekha Dance Party.

Additional special events over the weekend included two films: Jeff Roy's film *Mohammed to Maya*, a documentary that tells the story of one woman who undergoes gender reassignment surgery in Bangkok, Thailand, and Joseph Elders' *Lord Murugan and South Indian Hinduism*, a film about the religious complexities and nuances of South Indian Dravidian civilization. For the plenary address Saturday afternoon, Thirty Umrigar and Shyam Selvadurai, both accomplished authors, discussed the role of trust and how it both plays into, and is sometimes absent, in their writing. The conference weekend also included a book publishers' exhibition highlighting the newest texts across disciplines and regions of South Asian Studies.

The annual members' meeting of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS), as well as the annual meeting of the ANHS

Executive Committee were held during the conference weekend. The ANHS members' meeting included general updates from President Mary Cameron, which included the announcement that Heather Hindman will now serve as President and webmaster for ANHS. It was also made known that Debarati Sen will be joining the ANHS Executive Council as Treasurer. *HIMALAYA* co-editor Sienna Craig announced the Call for Papers for the *HIMALAYA* special issue on '2015 Earthquakes and their Aftermaths'; the deadline for these submissions is June 1, 2016. She also made known that she, along with Mark Turin, will be stepping down as co-editors of *HIMALAYA* by the end of 2017, and that ANHS is currently seeking new editors to take over at that time. Also at the meeting, this year's winner of the annual Dor Bahadur Bista prize for best graduate student paper was awarded to Uma Pradhan, a PhD candidate in International Development at the University of Oxford. Her winning paper, based on her recent ethnographic research concerning mother tongue education in Nepal, is entitled, 'The New Languages of Schooling: Ethnicity, Education, and Equality in Nepal.' The meeting concluded with the news that many interesting papers and panels have been accepted to the 4th Himalayan Studies Conference, to be held at the University of Texas in Austin in February 2016.

The 44th Annual Conference on South Asia was a productive, lively, and informative conference weekend, for both Nepal and Himalayan studies scholars and the South Asian studies community at large. Especially in light of the recent tragedy in Nepal, it was wonderful to get together with other scholars of the region to talk about recent experiences in post-earthquake Nepal and discuss

ways in which constructive, effective progress is being made. Being new to the field of South Asian Studies, it was inspiring to witness how Nepal and Himalayan Studies is able to both provide a regionally-focused platform to share ideas and research yet also transcend disciplinary differences in order to engage in productive dialogue concerning scholarship in an array of areas. I look forward to next fall in Madison at the 45th Annual Conference on South Asia.

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2015 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion

Atlanta, GA

19-24 November 2015

The 2015 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) was held in Atlanta on November 19-24. The largest conference on the academic study of religion, the conference was attended by over ten thousand members and exhibitors from sixty-nine different countries, with 1341 sessions held during the five-day meeting.¹ Though not specifically geared towards the religions and cultures of the Himalayan region, the conference began with the opening ceremonies for the construction of a sand mandala by a group of Tibetan Buddhist monks from Drepung Loseling Monastery in Atlanta. The construction of the mandala continued over the first several days of the conference.²

Several groups and sections focusing on Hinduism, Buddhism, and the religions of South Asia hosted panels that engaged the Himalayan region. For example, "Proclaiming Power: The Ritual Uses of Flags in South

Asia," co-sponsored by the Religion in South Asia section and Hinduism Group, examined the royal flag (*dhvaja*) as a manifestation of royal *dharma* and public religion in late-Vedic texts, art historical materials, and contemporary Jain performances in India and Nepal. Another panel, 'Weaving Traditions, Casting Spells: Tantra, Magic, and Folk Religion,' co-sponsored by the Tantric Studies Group, explored the use of magic – in both the literate, Sanskrit and vernacular folk traditions – as "an important aspect of living Tantric traditions, appearing in meditation, art, literature and ritual." The papers in this panel examined the many sides of Tantra: dangerous *ojha*, *bir*, *pishacha*, and snakes as well as the beneficial *siddhas*, *yantras*, and *mantras* that offer powerful protection.

The Tibetan and Himalayan Religions Group, a group that encourages scholarship on this geographical area through multidisciplinary, transregional, and cultural historical approaches, sponsored four dynamic panels. The first panel, 'Female Lives and Narratives in Tibet: New Materials and New Perspectives,' contained four papers that each offered new perspectives to the lives of women in Tibet through the presentation of new materials or fresh analyses. According to the panel organizers, the papers in this panel sought to "articulate diverse modes of female engagement, bring fresh insights into how we might recover female voices and perspectives across Himalayan Buddhist communities, and explore issues related to gender and genre in Tibetan literature." The historical range of this panel was rather wide: whereas two papers focused on Yeshe Tsogyel, the eighth century "matron saint" of Tibet, the other three papers dealt with individual texts, collections of sources, and individual

female religious figures through the eighteenth and twenty-first centuries.

The other three Tibetan and Himalayan Religions panels were co-sponsored by one or more additional group or section, thus contributing to the interdisciplinarity found in the mission of the group. 'Ritual (and) Practice in Hindu and Buddhist Tantrism,' co-sponsored by the Tantric Studies Group, explored three issues related to tantric performances in South Asian religion: "the place of imagination in Buddhist tantric ritual, the role ritual plays in managing death in Saiva traditions, and the place of the institution of celibacy and renunciation in tantric and non-tantric Hindu traditions."

Co-sponsored by the Buddhism Section, "Tibetan Teachers, Tibetan Performers: Can Performance Theories Help Us Understand Buddhist Pedagogical Practices?" asked a number of related questions regarding the performance-related language – such as "verbal acts" and "performative utterances" – that theorists might apply to Tantric verbal practices and the pedagogical ramifications of this approach.

The final panel, '(Re)presentations of Science and Yogic Religion in Pop Culture,' was co-sponsored by three other groups: Religion and Popular Culture, Religion and Science Fiction, and Yoga in Theory and Practice. This panel analyzed a number of case studies on *yogi* figures from Western popular culture, including the Batman and Spider-Man comic books, David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* series of the 1990s, and the Star Trek and Doctor Who science-fiction series. The five papers in this panel viewed these powerful *yogi* figures as "carriers of esoteric allusions and meanings as well as sites of slippage between fantasy and science fiction ... drawing on the Oriental mystique of India and Tibet."