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Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya

Kathmandu, Nepal

25-27 July 2018

The Seventh Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya took place at Hotel Shanker in Kathmandu on 25-27 July 2018. The conference was organized by the Social Science Baha based in Kathmandu, in addition to the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies (United States), the Britain-Nepal Academic Council, the Centre for Himalayan Studies-CNRS (France), and the Nepal Academic Network (Japan). The conference featured panels and papers presented by scholars based both in Nepal and those doing research on Nepal from institutions around the world, with a notable number of Canadian scholars in attendance. The conference schedule and paper abstracts may be found on the Social Science Baha website at <<http://annualconference.soscbaha.org/panelsessions-2018>>.

The conference covered a wide array of disciplines within the social sciences, ranging from matters of aid, architecture, and infrastructure, to legal matters and religion. The conference did not feature keynote speeches or lectures. While most of the conference was split into simultaneous panels in two halls, the first day of the conference began with a single panel on labor migration, with particular emphasis upon female labor migrants. Discussion ranged from narratives of the loss of innocence and unwitting deception as discussed by Arjun Kharel (Social Science Baha), to suggestions for a greater consideration of narratives of masculinity as suggested by Ang Sanu Lama (independent researcher).

A panel on the first day focused on the ethnography of infrastructure as being both a source of practical connectivity and a signifier of the legitimacy of the state was framed within a discussion about the public secrets of corruption and low bidding. Sara Shneiderman (University of British Columbia) highlighted the manner in which such practices are collective and democratic responses to the difficulties of market making. She questioned whether, in that light, corruption of the elite is more or less corrupt or excusable than that of the poor. In another panel on legal instruments in Nepal, Chiara Letizia (Université du Québec à Montréal) presented on the campaign against animal sacrifice spurred by the mass sacrifice of buffalo in Gadhimai in the Terai. She discussed the Supreme Court ruling against continuing animal sacrifice and its recommendation for a gradual reduction—taking upon itself the authority to make religious decisions. She pointed out the manner in which Hindu religious practices were reinterpreted as superstition and how the legal system emphasized Pahari, high-caste and high-land perspectives over Madhesi conceptions of Hindu religiosity.

The second day of the conference opened with a panel on the Nepali diaspora. Kathryn Ruth Stam (SUNY Polytechnic Institute) presented on the experiences of Bhutanese-Nepali refugee families in Utica, New York. Stam focused in particular on the manner in which these refugee families continued or developed new understandings of family, religion, and caste. Nabin Maharjan (Brock University) and Thomas O'Neill (Brock University) considered the difficulty new Nepali immigrants to Canada face in meeting mandatory voluntary hour expectations in

high schools, and Wayne Johnston (University of Guelph) read a work of creative writing on experiences of memory and its continual evolution in light of the re-evaluation of the past. Bandita Sijapati (independent researcher) noted the common themes of materiality and encouraged its further exploration. She also addressed the matter of identity as it relates to internalized and evolving conceptions of the self.

A panel on Christianity in Nepal was opened with a paper by Guillaume Boucher (Université du Québec à Montréal) on Catholic conversion in the Hindu context of Nepal's Terai. He explored how the anthropology of Christianity had seen a narrative on Hindu practice as emphasizing orthopraxy over orthodoxy, whereas conversion is seen as a rupture in this pattern, but with some continuities with this former approach. Further, he examined the questions of 'inculturation' and the notion of the 'merely cultural' as not relevant to religious life. Victoria Dalzell (independent scholar) looked at Tharu Christian protestants and the indiginization of practices such as expressing Christian theology in the form of familiar socio-spiritual experiences. For example, in certain Kathariya Tharu song and dance the names of Hindu gods are replaced with those of Christian figures. Amar BK (University of Pittsburgh) examined Bible reading by Madesi Dalit women in Pokhara as part of a movement called Sachai, which is led by what were characterized as fairly uncharismatic men and women, but whose membership is made up of 99% women. Discussion centered around the interaction between various new religious movements (as well as interactions between Catholics and Protestants), motivations for joining such movements, the question of

charisma on the part of leaders, and the manner in which music mediated the transmission of theologies in less literate communities. The second day ended with a panel presentation and discussion of research projects related to the 2015 earthquake and its aftermath.

The third day opened with a similar panel on "re/construction," beginning with a paper by Shneiderman on infrastructural change over the past twenty years in Nepal using poignant and specific case studies. Dan Hirslund (University of Copenhagen) reflected on the relations between laborers and middle-men (*tekhidars*) at labor stops throughout the Kathmandu Valley, paying particular attention to matters of class, social solidarity, and exploitation. Bishnu Pandey (British Columbia Institute of Technology) approached the discussion through a different lens with his exploration of post-earthquake reconstruction from the perspective of an engineer. He touched upon the non-integration of knowledge regarding seismic protection in earthquake-sensitive developing countries, the differences between construction materials in earthquake situations, and how engineers must not simply apply knowledge but must adapt knowledge to local conditions (building in culturally acceptable ways safely) and promote the generation of local knowledge. Philippe Le Billon (University of British Columbia) reflected on the theme of expertise and agency (particularly that of objects), and how to be a responsible expert. In a panel on inclusion and representation in federal Nepal, Sanjaya Mahato and Pooja Chaudhary, both of the Social Science Baha, reviewed the manner in which women were gradually included into elected bodies and were required

to occupy a growing minimum percentage of elected bodies, and questioned the extent to which their presence in parties was approached with a mentality of “tokenism” or as equal members of a team. She argued that the former situation appears to be the case over the latter.

The conference concluded with a panel on modernity and materiality in development. Thomas Robertson (Fulbright Commission, Nepal) gave an engaging presentation on DDT in Nepal in the context of the cold war and competition with Chinese and Soviet projects in Nepal in the 1960s. He focused on Dang in the Terai, where land reform started in 1965 with strong US support and was followed by DDT spraying, which resulted in a large migration of people from the hills into the valley. Robertson noted that most landlords had methods of circumventing land reforms, and that compulsory credit bank projects simply reintroduced the system of debt and bondage which the Tharu laborers were supposed to have been freed from by the reforms, resulting in a subsequent migration of those bonded laborers out of the valley. Robertson’s presentation in particular made exceptional use of PowerPoint as a tool for presenting pictures rather than words. Youba Raj Luintel (Tribhuvan University) presented on the expansion and consolidation of a middle class in post-1990 Nepal. He noted theses of a vanishing middle class in the US, and argued that in Nepal the middle class is, on the contrary, expanding. Luintel further noted that now there are many kinds of new occupations and thus new avenues of access to cash, new availability of cash, and over 400% growth in per capita consumption. However, he also commented on the lack of similar growth among the working

class. The panel and conference was closed with remarks by Steven Folmar (Wake Forest University), who thanked those responsible for making the conference a success, those who participated, and those who presented and noted that the lights repeatedly turning off was a sign that we must part.

While the conference was heavy on quantitative and social sciences, one of the few common themes throughout was that of materiality and agency, providing ample material for reflection in a variety of realms.

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