

## NEWS

## Conferences

**The Problem of National Identity of Ethnic Groups and National Integration. April 15-16, 1993 in Kathmandu**

Martin Gaenszle

This seminar was organised by the "Ethno-Students' Forum", a "nonpolitical volunteer organization, established in July 1992" by students of Tribhuvan University, and had the objective "1. to identify the problems of nationalities and indigenous peoples; 2. to increase indigenous peoples' publicity all over the country; 3. to raise awareness of the need for national integration & ethnic identification among students, intellectuals, political activists, social workers and planners too; 4. to encourage the indigenous peoples' organisations & communities to preserve and develop their cultures." (quote from the proposal)

Not surprisingly the issues raised during the seminar were not entirely unpolitical, as it was widely felt - and also stressed in the inaugural speech of the Minister for Housing and Physical Planning Bal Bahadur Rai - that the ethnic groups in Nepal still lack equal opportunities. The topicality, however, did not diminish the academic quality of the papers, and as, significantly, most of the commentators were chosen from "high castes", discussions were critical and lively.

Om Gurung in his paper on the "Formation of the Nation-State and the Creation of a National Identity" stressed the power aspect of national integration: he described processes like Nepalization as survival strategies rather than expressive of the peoples' wishes, and therefore the result was a destruction of ethnic identities. In his comment Prayag Raj Sharma warned against an ideology of tribalization, as only a secular outlook of modernization can bring

any advance.

Novel Kishor Rai spoke on the "Status of Multilinguals in Educational Development". Though the right for primary education in one's mother tongue is established in the new Constitution, it is still not clear whose responsibility it is to provide for this. Rather than wait for the government to do something, Dr. Rai called on the people's own initiative to organise evening classes and to promote linguistic and lexicographic work on the numerous languages. The paper was commented on by Madhav Pokharel.

Gopal Singh Nepali, speaking on "Questions of National Integration", emphasized that though the process of Nepal's unification in territorial, economic and administrative terms has long been completed, this cannot be said about the emotional aspect. But the only solution, he said, is a modern value system: With the return of democracy, the "*parbatiya-model*" of a caste-society must be replaced by a model of cultural pluralism.

The second day began with a paper by Sitaram Tamang on the "Current Socio-Economic and Political Conditions of Ethnic Groups" which consisted largely of statistical figures concerning the distribution of high castes and Newar vs. "the ethnic groups" (*janajāti*) in higher administrative and educational positions. The commentator, Chaitanya Mishra, pointed to flaws in the census data, and stressed the necessity to take into account the internal differentiation of "the ethnic groups".

In his paper on the "Problems of the Development of the Backward Indigenous People" Bihari Krishna Shrestha pointed out that backwardness (or poverty) is independent of ethnic affiliation. He called for an identification of absolute poverty so that those who are really in need can be given special assistance. Dilli Ram Dahal, in his commentary, reminded him that cultural differences are not to be disregarded, because, for example, Brahmins always

send their children to school even if they are poor.

Stephen Mikesell presented a paper on "Democracy and Political Participation of Ethnic Minorities". Describing political parties in Max Weber's terms as bureaucratic organisations with their own internal power structures, he warned that multi-party democracy in itself is not sufficient as long as old structures persist and people on the grass-root level are not in a position to hold their "representatives" fully accountable. The paper was commented on by Anantaraj Paudyal.

The last paper was on "Ethnic Identity Among the Mehawang Rai" by Martin Gaenzle. He drew attention to the traditional sense of ethnic identity which is rooted in the mythology of the *muddum*. Whereas this kind of identity is relational and inclusive, regarding cultural difference as ultimately deriving from common origins, in recent developments of Rai ethnicity the ethnic boundary is redrawn in more absolute terms.

As most of the papers and discussions were in Nepali and some in English, it was difficult to come to an agreement on terminological matters (e.g., the use of terms such as "nation" and "ethnicity"). In any case, the event showed that it doesn't require a fancy budget to have a fruitful and well attended seminar.

### **The Himalayan Forum at the London School of Oriental & African Studies, Spring Term, 1993**

In the spring seminar series the following papers were presented and discussed

February 4 - Jane Carter (Overseas Development Institute, London): Indigenous environment knowledge: a case study from Dolakha district, Nepal

February 11 - Poonam Thapa (IPPF, London): Non-governmental organisa-

tions and development in Nepal  
February 18 - Robbie Barnett (Tibet Information Network: 'Little door, big door': reforms in Tibet in 1992

February 25 - (in conjunction with the Bhutan Society of the U.K.) Sonam Chhoki (SOAS): Patterns of Bhutanese village life

March 11 - Tamara Kohn (University of Durham): Learning beyond language: brides and anthropologists in the hills of east Nepal

May 13 - Robbie Barnett (Tibet Information Network): 'Little door, big door': reforms in Tibet in 1992

May 20 - Myra Shackley (Nottingham Trent University): The impact of tourism in upper Mustang, Nepal

## **Project**

### **Himalaya-talenproject "Himalayan Languages Project" Rijksuniversiteit Leiden**

George van Driem

On the 8th of April this year, the **Himalayan Language Project** of Leiden University (Rijksuniversiteit Leiden) was inaugurated in Leiden at Snouck Hurgronje House. The project director is Dr. George van Driem, and the sponsors are the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek), Leiden University and the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen).

The project will recruit six or seven young linguists for the description of languages of Nepal and Bhutan. Each linguistic description, which is meant to serve as the individual researcher's doctoral dissertation, is to consist of an introduction, grammar (phonology,

morphology, syntax), verbal paradigms, analysed texts and a glossary. Researchers will also be encouraged to incorporate a study of the indigenous religion, pantheon, rituals and oral traditions into their grammars. Such a grammar must be completed within four years and should preferably be written in English. In exceptional cases, a well-designed proposal for a substantive dissertation which deviates from the above format, e.g., a comparative grammar of Newari dialects, may be approved. The oral defence of the dissertation will take place in Leiden and be conducted in Dutch. In exceptional cases, the term of employment may be extended by an additional fifth year, provided that the integral manuscript of the dissertation has already been completed. The costs of fieldwork and necessary vaccinations will be defrayed within prescribed limits. Salaries will be in accordance with

## **Symposia**

### **Report from the Symposia Bhutan - A Traditional Order and the Forces of Change School of Oriental and African Studies, 22-23 March 1993**

Michael Hutt (convenor)

The idea of this conference was suggested by three Himalayan Forum seminars on Bhutan during late 1991 and early 1992 which attracted great interest. There is growing political crisis in Bhutan which has so far led to the arrival of approximately 78,000 refugees on Nepalese soil and about 20,000 in India. Bhutan, the world's last Mahayana Buddhist state, remains little-known. In 1991 it was possible for its government to state that it had revised its official population figure from 1.2 million to 600,000. In a situation in which perhaps one-sixth of the population has fled or been expelled, but in which basic population data

the Dutch norms for *onderzoekers-in-opleiding*. A good command of spoken and written Nepali is an absolute prerequisite. In Bhutan, a good working knowledge of Dzongkha is essential, in addition to a good command of Nepali.

In addition to the team of young linguists, **The Himalayan Languages Project** will fund short-term projects by scholars from Nepal, Bhutan or other countries, either working in the Himalayas or as visiting scholars in Leiden. These projects are meant to yield some tangible result such as a publication.

Applications, requests for information and suggestions may be addressed to: Dr. George van Driem, Himalayan Language Project, Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, Postbus 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, Kingdom of the Netherlands.

are not available, exaggerated claims can be made on both sides of the argument - claims which are difficult to evaluate. Because most analyses of the causes and nature of the crisis have been polemical and biased, it was felt that dispassionate academic scrutiny of (a) the culture that Bhutan is seeking to protect, and (b) the nature of the perceived threat to that culture, might be both constructive and timely.

I visited Bhutan for two weeks in September 1992. There I was the guest of the government, whose foreign minister took the view that an academic appraisal of Bhutan's current situation would be of benefit to the kingdom. In Thimphu the resident UNDP representative agreed in principle to funding the attendance of Bhutanese delegates to the conference. Similarly, in Kathmandu, the British Council agreed to consider sending the editor of *Himal*, a well-known journal that had recently focused on Bhutan. Both promises bore fruit.

A programme gradually evolved, growing from one to two days: of the 19 papers eventually presented, about half had

a direct bearing on the political crisis. The others addressed aspects of Bhutan's heritage: architecture, environment, religion and textiles. There were contributors from Bhutan (3), India (1), Nepal (1), the USA (3), France (2), Germany (1), Belgium (1), Hong Kong (1), Japan (1), Holland (1), and four from the United Kingdom (of whom one was a Bhutanese national).

A minor crisis arose a few weeks before the conference. Two leaders of exiled dissident groups were planning to attend, either to present papers or as members of the audience. It became apparent that if they did attend, the Bhutanese government would be reluctant to send delegates. The choice thus became one between a conference at which the Bhutanese government would be represented, or a gathering from which it had withdrawn. In view of the effort that had been expended to draw in government representatives, it was decided that the former option was preferable. Therefore, the conference was attended by Dasho Jigmi Thinley, Secretary to the Ministry of Home Affairs, but not by any representative of the exiled opposition. Ultimately, the politics of such a conference had to be the art of the possible. As the convenor, I had to do douse rumours of political blackmail, but after the event there was general agreement that the conference had been benefited from the presence of the Bhutanese government more than it would have from the presence of the opposition.

The conference was attended by 250 people. They included not only academics and journalists but also representatives of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the United Nations Development Programme, VSO, the World Bank, donor agencies from New Zealand and Holland, the Nepalese Embassy, the Indian High Commission, Amnesty International, and members of the general public with an interest in Bhutan from 16 different countries. Of the two central themes of the conference (Bhutan's cultural heritage and its present political crisis), various aspects of

the crisis tended to dominate discussions. Since this was the first international conference that has ever focused on Bhutan, and the first occasion on which a gathering had ever discussed the highly contentious political issues, there seemed to be a general consensus that this was appropriate.

The non-contentious papers were on the environment (from Bruce Bunting of the World Wildlife Fund), textiles (from Diana Myers of the Peabody and Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts and Françoise Pommaret of the CNRS in Paris), architecture (from Wolf Kahlen of the Technische Universität, Berlin, and Marc Dujardin of the St. Lucas School of Architecture in Ghent, Belgium), and Buddhism (from Michael Kowalewski and Sonam Chhoki of SOAS). Most of these provoked interesting and constructive discussions. Dujardin's illustrated presentation, backed up by an exhibition in the foyer, was especially appreciated.

The conference was addressed early on the Monday morning by Michael Aris of St. Anthony's College, Oxford, who is the leading western authority on Bhutanese history. Aris described several instances in which disputes had been settled through traditional means of conciliation. His scholarly but adventurous paper set the tone for much of the rest of the conference. Another paper of particular value and interest was that presented by Leo Rose, who discussed the role of the monarchy in Bhutan's present crisis. Other speakers were Yasuyuki Kurita (Osaka), George van Driem (Leiden), A. Sinha (Shillong), Thierry Mathou (CNRS, Paris), Brian Shaw (Hong Kong), Karma Ura (Thimphu), Nicholas Nugent (BBC World Service), Kanak Mani Dixit (Kathmandu) and Kinley Dorji (Thimphu).

The discussion of the political issue was dominated at first by the government's view, which is that Bhutan has become the victim of an orchestrated campaign designed to destroy its distinctive culture and to reinstate thousands of illegal immigrants who were recently expelled. The alternative

view - of Bhutan as a despotic feudal state that has expelled one-sixth of its population to forestall demands for democracy - was less thoroughly propounded in the papers presented, but the various debates that took place over the two days, as well as a vigorous protest from the UNHCR representative against allegations of careless registration of Bhutanese refugees, meant that both sides of the argument were presented less dogmatically by the end of the conference. By popular demand, a woman who had worked in the refugee camps in Nepal gave a brief impromptu presentation and answered questions.

The Kathmandu-based Human Rights Organisation of Bhutan, in an editorial in the December 1992 issue of its monthly *Bhutan Focus* stated: "That the conference is to take place in faraway England gives us some cause for rejoicing. There is hope that unaffected members on the panel will bring pressure to bear so that objectivity does not become a casualty." The conference, inevitably, failed to clarify the political issues: instead, it impressed upon the minds of all those present the complexity of the real situation. It also demonstrated the extent to which research is required into the historical process of eastward migration from Nepal.

The principal issue that loomed over this conference was the presence in Nepal

and India of about 100,000 displaced people, the majority of whom have probably come from Bhutan, representing a significant proportion of its total population. Because the issue is highly emotive in Bhutan - where it is tied up with a perceived threat to the nation's sovereignty - and in Nepal - where it is considered to be a part of a repression of democracy and human rights - frank and open discussions are only possible far away. Up until this conference, the Bhutanese government had never exposed itself to uncensored and unpredictable questioning in an open public forum. SOAS had an important role to play in bringing together proponents of differing views: the academic environment was felt by the Bhutanese government to be relatively safe. Perhaps the most satisfying memory of the conference is of the second evening, when members of the Nepalese Embassy, the UNHCR and the Bhutanese government, having consistently disagreed with one another for a total of 16 hours, relaxed together over drinks in the Senior Common Room.

The conference is receiving coverage in the Bhutanese and Nepali media, and has been reported on the BBC World Service and Deutsche Welle. It is intended to produce a volume of selected papers.

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

### Conference

#### 14th Annual Conference of the Linguistic Society of Nepal

The Linguistic Society of Nepal (LSN) will hold its 14th Annual Conference at Kirtipur Campus, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, on November 26-27, 1993.

The Society invites for papers in the

following areas:

Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan languages; phonetics and phonology; syntax and semantics; sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics; orthography and lexicography; historical and comparative linguistics; applied linguistics; linguistics and literature.

A copy of your paper or an abstract of about 200 words should reach the Society by October 31, 1993. The Society regrets for not being in a position to provide any funds