

NEWS

Himalayan Portraits

Thoughts and Opinions from the *Film Himalaya* Film Festival
18-20 February 1994 in Kathmandu/Nepal

The main aim of the festival's creators, the editors and journalists of the Kathmandu-based magazine HIMAL, was that it should be devoted solely to documentary films on the Himalayan Region. "We have always felt interested in documentary films, because they are the visual-electronic equivalent of a magazine like ours (...). We decided to set up a film festival because the time was ripe", said Kanak Mani Dixit, editor of HIMAL.

A total of 42 of the 85 entries were shown at the festival, where the emphasis in the selection process was more on diversity and giving a representative sample than on quality; above all they should show "how others portray us around the world". Given this, it is impossible to blame the organisers for including so many bad films which would never have had a chance at other festivals - which try after all to show the best. While making their selection, the organisers also noticed that the films were "not intended for consumption here but abroad", and thus a further aim of the festival developed: making films about the Himalayan region available to the people who live there.

The festival was opened on 18th of February by the Raja of Mustang, Jigme Parbal Bista, followed by the screening of the first of two feature films included in the programme. Premiered in September 1993 in New York, *Barkara* by Ron Fricke, a follow-up to the successful film *Koyaanisqatsi* has a similar construction to its predecessor and is not actually a film about the Himalayas and its inhabitants. Just the opening sequences were shot in the region: an early morning street cleaning scene in the temple district of Patan, bathed romantically in the golden yellow of the rising sun; figures wrapped in shawls are captured by the camera (or rather "arranged" before the lens in prettiest postcard style); the half veiled people stare dark-eyed at the audience, right through them. The film then embarks on an odyssey through 24 countries, documenting (in the narrowest sense of the word by simply recording) different religious rites, landscapes and natural phenomena, but also dichotomising by the manner in which they are depicted: "Whilst maintaining a romantic perspective on the spiritual wealth of developing countries, the film remains ethnically stratified, ending up as an indictment of the southern hemisphere for its squalor and ignorance, apportioning the blame for the mindless modernity and consumerism on the rest of the Third World for environmental degradation, strife and poverty". (Anmole Prasad in HIMAL 1994, Vol 7, No 2). A film festival that intended holding up a mirror to its own people (the festival issue of HIMAL is aptly named "Mirror, Mirror") and taking a critical look at the way the Himalayan region is depicted in film, could have given less prominence to this film, even if this was its Asian premier. The organisers' decision to begin the festival with this film can

best be seen as a marketing ploy; and one that paid off, judging by the almost unanimous enthusiasm and the packed house as the film was repeated on the last day.

Afterwards the films were shown in quick succession to a strict (sometimes too strict) schedule in the two rooms of the Russian Cultural Centre. The films not only differed greatly in length, but also in content and quality. The shortest contribution was *The first American Mission to Nepal 1947*, a 20 minute compilation of rare archive footage accompanied by a live commentary from Hutaram Baidya (described in the programme as a "valley observer and environmentalist"); the lengthiest film, *Deva and Cinta*, lasting over two hours, is an ethnographical record of the preparation and conducting of a shaman's seance filmed in 1990 in eastern Nepal by Albin Bieri, Martin Gaenzle and Majan Garlinski.

All in all the films shown over the three days covered a wide variety of topics, including mountaineering, ecology, religion, ethnography, indigenous medicine, culture and travel.

Particularly striking and unusual on the first day was *Kumari* (undated), a film from France by Sylvie Joset Segur which dealt with the Living Goddess and the way her successor is chosen. Although the commentator's voice at the beginning is over-dramatic and suggestive, and the film presumes a certain prior knowledge of Newar festivals if any sense is to be made of the powerful scenes of animal sacrifices, the long shots, especially of the faces of the Kumari and her possible successors, made up for any shortcomings. The question remained though how the scenes were shot at locations that normally exclude cameras, such as inside the Kumari house and the temple where the animal sacrifices were held.

Less welcome was *The Splendour of Garwhal and Roop Kund* (1993) by the actor and director Victor Banerjee, a sickly sweet film which could not hide its sponsorship by the tourist trade, and was anything but a documentary.

Another film that morning, *Sustainable Development in the Arun Basin* (undated) by Kevin Kelpin and Pushpa Tulachan, was followed by sometimes heated discussions; these were unique during the whole festival, and largely possible because of the lunch break that followed, which meant that the timetable was not endangered. The film claimed to investigate the interests, fears and wishes of the populace which is affected by the construction of the gigantic hydro-electric power plant and, above all, of the road to the site. It left the audience however with the empty feeling that the film's backers (UNDP and World Bank) had written the commentary. "I would have liked to see what people of the area thought, rather than having a commentary with a predetermined point of view being sold", said Sanjeev Prakash, journalist and film maker from Delhi, one of the many critical voices among the audience.

The second day started with *The Dragon Bride* (1991) by Joanna Head, an outstanding film about a polygamous marriage in Humla in north-west Nepal, which besides being entertaining, is also informative and ethnographically noteworthy. The film is a first class example that filmed ethnographies are not necessarily boring (as was contended by the producer of *Honey Hunters in Nepal* [1987]), and quoted by the co-director Diane Summers when asked what

had happened to her film's broader context). Anthropology in film is not boring, it simply depends on the way in which it is presented - which is where the artistry begins. What made *The Dragon Bride* particularly exciting and lively were the dialogues, not only between the performers, but also between the performers and the director or rather her interpreter. Unlike so many other films, the dialogues were not obscured by superimposed commentaries, and it was also especially clear to see (and hear) here that film making always entails interaction with the film crew and is not the result of a monologue.

An amusing yet thought-provoking film shown on the same day was the low budget production *Trekking on Tradition* (1992) by Jennifer Rodes, which looked at the influence of trekkers on the local population in the Kali Gandaki region. Once again the locals had their own say, expressing how they both admire and envy, but also detest the behaviour of the western trekkers.

The third and last day began with a film on Tibetan medicine - or what has become of it - full of sensitive understanding. *Shigatse: One Injection Asks for More* (1989), directed by the Swiss Jörg Neuenschwander, showed that second generation exiled Tibetans are "more Buddhist" than those who have remained in their homeland; the surprise and consternation at this in the face and words of an exile Tibetan woman now living in Switzerland spoke volumes. The afternoon brought the only genuine Nepalese film, *Lhwaka Yae Mwayna Haa!* (1993) (Newari for: Let us all pull together) by the young director Yadav Das Bhochhibhoya, which deals with the Chandeshwari-Jatra in Banepa. The film stood out on account of its directness, good cinematic ideas and moving presentation. Shortly before the end of the festival came another annoying film: *A Dentist from Mainz in Nepal* (undated) by Hermann Feicht, in which a German dentist wanders seemingly alone through the Himalayas and pulls teeth as others might pluck flowers. This was an example of how compulsive self-presentation (or the lack of imagination evinced by German television companies, such as ZDF which financed the film) can lead to yet another boring disaster being produced. (Not forgetting the damage done to the indigenous molars before the hero's exploits were committed to celluloid).

The film festival concluded with a reshooting of Frank Capra's 1937 classic *Lost Horizon* and the second feature film of the festival, the Chinese avant-garde film *Horse Thief* directed by Dao Ma Zei in 1986.

The festival organisers, who did not want a "glamorous film festival, but something very close to the ground", can be truly satisfied with the results. Packed auditoria, peaking in a scarcely controllable box office crush for *In Search of Buddha*, a film on the making of the Hollywood blockbuster *Little Buddha*. In the opinion of viewers, this did not fulfil its promise and added nothing new to the controversy surrounding Bertolucci's film which has raged for months, especially among Nepalese Buddhists.

Also interesting were the opinions of the Nepalese directors and cameramen who attended the festival: Prakash Jung Karki with his film: *Panauti: Hamro Sampada* [1993], a cinematic portrait of the small town Panauti which was co-financed by the French and shown on Nepalese television; the director Yadav Das Bhochhibhoya mentioned earlier; and the cameraman Anil Rijal (*Pavillion of the Eight Corners* [1990], a documentation

of the rebuilding of the Chyasilin Temple in Bhaktapur). They said that in comparison to previous festivals put on by various organisations in Kathmandu, the *Film Himalaya* festival gave the local people the chance to see films about their country and the neighbouring states. "That doesn't mean that local people reject European films in general, but what they liked most was that the films at the festival concentrated particularly on the Himalayan region. There is then a possibility to identify. What they see is quite familiar to them. Other film festivals tend to concentrate on films about Europe made in Europe. This time there were films mainly made in Europe, but which dealt with the Himalayan region. That was the big difference in comparison to other film festivals. In other film festivals you can sometimes see long documentaries, but they are only made through the eyes of directors from the remote European areas, and may not be interesting for Nepalese society, and perhaps not even for Nepalese producers, directors and camera-people, who are working in a different tradition", said Karki.

The fact that there are differences between Asia and the West in what people prefer and are used to seeing was newly underlined as the media magnate Rupert Murdoch announced that his satellite programme in Asia would stop importing films from the USA, and now be specially tailored to the Asian market. This and much more could have provided food for discussion. The reason why this failed to happen is not merely that there is no tradition of viewing and discussing films in Nepal (as the festival organisers assumed), but also because a suitable platform was missing. An hour of impromptu talks was organised spontaneously on the last day, during which Prof. Gerald Berremann, anthropologist at Berkeley University, Prem Basnet, director, Majan Garlinski, co-producer of *Deva and Cinta*, and Sanjeev Prakash, journalist and film maker from Delhi, gave their comments on the topic: "Himalayan film making, Himalayan reality, and how the Himalayan region is portrayed to the outside world and perhaps to the population of the Himalayas who had the chance of seeing the films." But this can just be seen as the beginning of a deeper appraisal of this topic. Given the large number of rare or seldom shown films, there must be an opportunity for a proper assessment if the festival is to be more than just a pleasurable viewing experience. An accompanying seminar would be desirable, in which the topics that are raised could be discussed by experts, and perhaps trigger an interesting discourse on film making in the Himalayas. All that remained for the organisers was to hope that the films had "put a seed into the people's mind, which they will take with them" and to announce the second *Film Himalaya* in 1996.

It should be added that the festival organisers are in the process of creating a video library (films on the Himalayan region) and are following up the Kathmandu festival with a "travelling film festival", and as part of this a number of the same films will shortly be on show in Pokhara, Palpa, Narayanghat, Nainital and Kalimpong.

Brigitte Merz

**Oral Tradition Study Group /Himalaya
Second Meeting in Paris, February 25, 1994**

This working meeting had been convened to discuss the following issues in oral tradition studies: the methodological problems of presentation, translation and interpretation of oral texts, the myth-ritual interrelationship, and the interpenetration of oral and written traditions.

Altogether five papers were presented:

Martin Gaenszle's "Offerings to the House Deities - Degrees of Formality in Mewahang Rai Ritual Speech" discussed two ritual texts, comparing the differing styles and uses of the ritual language and analysing their formal properties.

Catherine Champion spoke on "Narrative Songs of the Bhojpuri Bard and Printed Texts: the Example of the *gāthā* of Alha-Udal", focusing on the changing techniques of dissemination (books, tape recordings etc.) of a formerly entirely oral tradition.

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine presented a paper on "Sunkesari, the Golden Haired Girl." She compared the widely known Nepali folkstory of Sunkesari with a local version collected among the Magar ethnic group.

Simon Strickland's paper "Gurung *pe* and *lu*" discussed indigenous concepts about Gurung ritual recitations, raising the problem of the interrelationship of myth and ritual.

Corneille Jest spoke on "Fading Memories of Myths and Legends, Disappearing Techniques: the Example of Weaving in the Himalayas", showing the cultural importance of weaving as depicted in various Himalayan oral traditions, and stressing the link between material culture and orally transmitted knowledge.

Also attending the meeting were P. Dollfus, M. Helffer, P. Massonnet, G. Toffin, and S. Manandhar.

Martin Gaenszle

**Nepal Maithili Samaj:
A Good Beginning**

The Nepal Maithili Samaj was constituted in Kathmandu on 12 August, 1991, with Sri Amaresh Narayan Jha as the coordinator. This social organisation of the Maithili-speaking people living in Kathmandu was registered with His Majesty's Government of Nepal with the following objectives:

1. To conduct conferences and seminars, undertake the publication of books and journals and organise programmes to raise the social and intellectual level of Maithils as a close-knit community.

2. To carry out and promote research work in the arts, culture and heritage of Mithila.

3. To conduct programmes designed to raise the consciousness of Maithils, to eradicate social evils prevalent among them and to bring them out of their inertia.

4. To conduct programmes related to social welfare by providing services such as health clinics, blood banks, scholarships for poor students and a revolving fund for financial support to the needy.

5. To develop contacts with national and international organisations for the development of traditional Maithili arts and handicrafts at national and international levels.

Over 2.02 million of the people of Nepal speak Maithili. The major Maithili-speaking districts are Bara, Rautahat, Sarlahi, Mahottari, Dhanusha, Siraha, Saptari, Morang, Sunsari and Jhapa. Many Maithili-speaking people from these districts are also spread over different parts of Nepal, being engaged in government service, in teaching and in business in a small way. Over 75,000 Maithili-speaking people live in the Kathmandu valley and approximately 2,000 Maithil families are permanently settled in the valley.

The history of Maithili and the Maithils in the valley goes back to the fourteenth century. Documents reveal that this language enjoyed a privileged position during the time of King Hari Singh Deva in the fourteenth century and the Malla dynasty in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Several Newar rulers of Bhaktapur even composed plays, poems and songs in Maithili, probably with the help of Maithil scholars and *paṇḍits* resident at their *Darbār*. There appears to be some evidence that some of these plays were staged on occasion. The glory of the language faded away in the nineteenth century.

With the restoration of democracy in Nepal in 1990, Maithili has been recognised as the second major language of Nepal, for 11.08 per cent of the population speak Maithili, next only to Nepali-speaking people constituting approximately 51 per cent of the population of Nepal.

So far, Maithili language and literature has not been given due recognition by His Majesty's Government of Nepal. For instance, the Public Service Commission of Nepal does not recognize Maithili even though it is taught at the Master's level, and Ph.D. degrees in Maithili literature have been awarded by Tribhuvan University. The teaching of Maithili is confined to two campuses of the University and to the school level in Maithili-speaking regions. Lately, His Majesty's Government has been considering making provision for primary education in local languages including Maithili. Radio Nepal has recently started broadcasting a five-to-seven-minute-long news bulletin in Maithili; once in a while, one can hear Maithili songs on the radio and on television. There are very few news magazines and other publications in Maithili; the few that are there remain isolated and irregular, being handicapped by a very small market and run by individual effort here and there. By and large, it is fair to say that there is little institutional support and/or encouragement for the development of the Maithili language and Maithili culture.

There are over two dozen Maithil-Maithili organisations in Nepal; some of them are listed below:

Kathmandu:	Akhil Nepal Maithili Sahitya Parishad (founded 1966) Maithili Vikas Manch (founded 1990) Nepal Tarai Student Council (founded ?) Nepal Maithil Samaj (founded August 1991)
Jhapa:	Maithil Samaj Samiti (founded August 1993)
Biratnagar:	Maithili Sewa Samiti Maithili Sahitya Parishad Maithili Vikas Manch
Rajbiraj:	Maithili Sahitya Parishad
Lahan:	Maithili Sahitya Parishad
Siraha:	Maithili Sahitya Parishad
Janakpur:	Maithili Sahitya Parishad Maithili Natya Kala Parishad Maithili Vikas Manch Mithila Samskritik Kendra
Malangwa:	Mithila Sewa Samiti
Birganj:	Maithili Sahitya Parishad
Dhangarhi:	Maithili Sewa Samiti

Among these, the Akhil Nepal Maithili Sahitya Parishad is the oldest organisation, having been set up in 1966 with a view to develop literary and academic interest in Maithili language and literature. The Parishad, however, remained confined to holding cultural programmes like the Vidyapati Parva from time to time and could not make a significant contribution to the cause of Maithili and the Maithils. It became defunct as it tended to let itself be used as a platform for securing positions in government.

Nepal Maithil Samaj has been actively engaged in social and cultural work aimed at building up a community spirit among Maithils ever since its inception. Some of the programmes the Samaj has brought off are as follows:

1. It organized a Maithili Cultural Show on the 14th of April, 1993, attended by nearly a thousand people in Kathmandu.
2. It organized a relief programme in July, 1993, when its volunteers distributed powdered milk, beaten rice, salt, onions, steel plates, pots and pans to over 500 families of flood victims in five villages of Sarlahi and Rautahat districts.
3. It participated in the first International Maithili Conference during June, 1993, at Ranchi, Bihar, India. The Samaj was selected as a member of the International Maithili Council constituted at this Conference.
4. It participated in the Seventh International Drama Programme held at Biratnagar in April, 1992.
5. It has managed to develop links with over two dozen Maithili organisations in Nepal and India.
6. It has participated in various national programmes in Nepal organized by His Majesty's Government, Royal Nepal Academy, NGOs, Radio Nepal and Nepal Television.
7. It publishes a regular quarterly bulletin entitled "Nepal Maithil Samaj Patrika" in Maithili. Since September, 1992, four issues have been published.

8. It formed a NEMS Youth Club for the active involvement of the younger generation in the activities of the Samaj.

9. Two annual general meetings of the Samaj have been organized so far and a seminar is being organized.

The fifteen-member Executive Committee of the Samaj meets twice a month to discuss and take decisions on the future course of action to be adopted in view of its principal objectives.

Nepal Maithil Samaj is slowly becoming known and its activities have attracted and inspired many Maithili-speaking people all over the country. The Samaj has the long-term plan to set up a Maithili Samskritik Kendra (Maithili Cultural Centre) to be housed in its own building, where a library, health centre and guest house can be run. It has plans too to provide scholarships to meritorious poor students and to establish a number of awards for social and academic work for Maithils and Maithili. Although these plans appear ambitious, great expectations have been generated among the Maithili-speaking people.

The Samaj is distinguished by a small band of young Maithils inspired by the love of their mother-tongue and dedicated to the cause of Maithili language, literature and culture. One of them even hopes to start a movement for the revival of the old Maithili script among the Maithili-speaking people.

Indeed, the Samaj seems determined to fight for the recognition of Maithili as the second most important language-and-culture group in Nepal through an ongoing dialogue with His Majesty's Government of Nepal and by continuing to build linkages with a number of Maithili organisations as well as the movement for the recognition of Maithili going on south of the border.

The present writer is of the view that the first and most crucial step for the Nepal Maithil Samaj is to establish its credibility among the Maithili-speaking people themselves as their own organisation, an organisation truly dedicated to the development of the language, literature and cultural heritage of old Mithila. Then and only then it could conceivably start a major renaissance among a small, neglected language-culture group with a long history and a rich written literature.

Murari Madhusudan Thakur

The Fourteenth Annual Conference of the Linguistic Society of Nepal

November 26-27, 1993

CEDA Auditorium, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur Campus

Welcoming the participants, Mr. Chandra Prakash Sharma, Secretary-Treasurer of the Society, reported that the Society has five Honorary Members: The late Prof. Ralph L. Turner, Prof. Kenneth L. Pike, Prof. R.K. Sprigg, Prof. Werner Winter and Prof. Bernhard Kölver; 111 Life

Members and 89 Regular Members. He went on to report that the Society has been able to generate a sum of Rs. 100,000 from membership fees and the conference registration fees, the interest from which has been a considerable help to bring out *Nepalese Linguistics*, the journal of the society.

In his inaugural address, Prof. Alan Davies of the Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Edinburgh, expressed his concern for the lesser known languages of Nepal and recommended that they should be studied before they completely die out. He said that he had been under the impression that Tribhuvan University had a department of linguistics, and that he was surprised to learn it did not, but he was happy to learn that the Linguistic Society of Nepal has been struggling to set one up. He concluded his address by wishing the conference great success.

In the presidential address, Mr. Nirmal Man Tuladhar, President of the Society said that having Prof. Alan Davies to inaugurate the 14th Annual Conference was indeed an auspicious occasion for the Society because it was he who for the first time introduced linguistics at the Department of English, Tribhuvan University in 1969 when he was in the Chair. He had also run three short-term courses on linguistics and applied linguistics for college teachers of English, thus paving the way for linguistic studies in Nepal. Tracing back the brief history of linguistic studies with its ups and downs, Mr. Tuladhar said that in 1972 the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies in conjunction with the Summer Institute of Linguistics launched an MA in Linguistics for postgraduates in English, which was the first and last such programme. He went on to say that in 1973 Tribhuvan University took the initiative of establishing a department of linguistics, so to design and assess the teaching-research infrastructure a committee was formed under Prof. P.R. Sharma, Dean of the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies (INAS). This Institute held the first Seminar in Linguistics on November 4-7, 1974 and also published the proceedings entitled *Seminar Papers in Linguistics: Problems and Perspectives in Linguistic Studies*. When INAS was converted into the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS) as a non-teaching institution in 1977 that was the end of the history of linguistic studies. When the Linguistic Society of Nepal came into being in 1979 the interest and concern for linguistic studies was revived. Updating the information about the status of the memorandum submitted to the Vice Chancellor of Tribhuvan University on January 8, 1993, requesting him to commission a task force to set up a department of linguistics, Mr. Tuladhar said that he had been keeping track of the memorandum and that the Rector had assured him that he would soon be commissioning a committee. He wound up the address by saying that the Society could be hopeful when there is a committee since where there is a committee, there is hope.

Mr. Hriseekesh Upadhaya, Chief Editor presented a copy of the latest *Nepalese Linguistics* to the chief guest. Mrs Rudra Laxmi Shrestha, Executive Member, gave a vote of thanks.

In his address as chairman, Prof. D.P. Bhandari, Executive Director of the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, expressed his happiness at being in the chair for the inaugural session. Prof. Bhandari concluded that there ought to

be a department of linguistics in the university for studying the languages of Nepal.

Session I: General Linguistics (Chair: Prof. Ramawatar Yadav)

1. Sunil Kumar Jha: The Inclusion of Aspiration in Distinctive Feature Theory.
2. George van Driem: East Bodish and Newari in the Comparative Context.
3. Roland Rutgers: The Status of Liquids in Consonant Clusters in Yamphu Rai.
4. Amma Raj Joshi: The Significance of Sound Variation in Pluralization in Bajhang dialect.
5. Warren W. Glover: Shoebox: Integrated Data Management and Analysis for the Field Linguist.

Session II: Applied Linguistics and Language Teaching (Chair: Prof. Sunil Kumar Jha)

1. Wayne Amtzis: Procedure, Context, Theme and Voice: Guided Writing for EFL Students.
2. Phanindra Upadhaya: The Possibility of Clinical Supervision at the Campus Level.
3. Hemanta Raj Dahal: An Overview of ELT Courses at MA English.
4. Sushma Regmi: Causes for the Deterioration of English in Higher Education.

Session III: Sociolinguistics and Language Planning (Chair: Prof. Kamal P. Malla)

1. Jeff Webster: Nepali Proficiency in Rural Nepal.
2. Bryan Varenkamp: The Nepali Sentence Repetition Test: Evaluating Community-Wise Bilingualism.
3. Ramawatar Yadav: The Use of the Mother Tongue in Primary Education: the Nepalese Context.
4. Bal Gopal Shrestha and Bert van den Hoek: Education in the Mother Tongue: A Case of Newari.

Session IV: Syntax and Semantics (Chair: Prof. Abhi Subedi)

1. J.P. Cross: The Derivation of Some English Words.
2. Madhav P. Pokharel: Aspect in Nepali.
3. Tej R. Kansakar: Classical Newari Verbal Morphology.
4. Tsetan Chonjore: Tibetan: "A Non-Tense Language".
5. Yogendra P. Yadava: Verb Agreement in Maithili.
6. Amrit Yonjan Tamang: Tamang Grammar.

Nirmal Man Tuladhar