

Conference Reports

Franco-Nepali conference on 'People, Environment and Landscapes of the Himalayas' 19-20 April 2000.

Conference report by Joëlle Smadja

A conference on 'People, Environment and Landscapes of the Himalayas' was held in Kathmandu on 19-20 April 2000 under the auspices of CNAS (Nepal) and CNRS (France). The papers presented were discussed by both Nepali and French scholars. The papers presented by the French scholars were summaries of research from an interdisciplinary programme sponsored by the Environmental Programme of CNRS, which has lasted for four years. A book presenting these data is under process. This programme aimed at a better understanding of the landscapes that can be seen today, their transformations and eventual environmental problems, the relationship of Himalayan societies (in Nepal and Ladakh) to their natural environment, and the ways they have used land and managed their resources over time. The landscape was here considered as the product, the result at a given time, of the use and management of space and resources by a population according to: physical environmental data, a society's perception of its environment, its cultural and social values, and its political, economic and technical history and needs. We have insisted on the variability of observations according to spatial and time scales and have recalled observations from the region before 1950. We have pointed out that, as Nepal was opened to experts, researchers, tourists, journalists, etc. only after 1950 and that at the same time numerous changes occurred—the eradication of malaria and the deforestation of the Terai, the demographic explosion, deforestation along the trekking routes—the 1950s became ground zero for observation which lack any context. But our field investigations in different parts of Nepal and Ladakh lead us to conclude that our observations make no sense unless they are situated within a spatial, historical and cultural context. Thus research has focused on the physical features which can explain diverse landscapes, historical documents, and qualitative and quantitative field enquiries related to the perception of space, resource management and land use. This was the main thrust of our interdisciplinary programme and of this conference.

Theme : Landscapes

Session I: Geographical and Cultural Features

Joëlle Smadja: Presentation of the programme 'Explanations of the diversity and the evolution of some landscapes in the Himalayas: examples from Nepal and Ladakh'.

Monique Fort: 'The role of invariant, physical factors in the shaping of landscapes of central Nepal'.

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine: 'Mental representation of the landscapes as an exegesis of the country'.

Pratyoush Onta: 'Cultivating Bhanubhakta: local landscapes of Nepali national culture'.

Pascale Dollfus: 'Landscape units and placenames in Ladakh'.

Ramesh K. Dhungel: 'The people and place-names of Lo/Mustang: historical and etymological perspective'.

Joëlle Smadja: 'The territory and landscape of the Tamang from Salme'.

Theme: Environmental Changes

Session II: Historical Features

Philippe Ramirez: 'When under-population was a nightmare: Gorkhali state and the transformation of Nepalese landscapes'.

Pascale Dollfus and Marie Lecomte-Tilouine: 'History of rice, maize and potato in the Himalayas'.

Mahes Raj Pant: 'A step towards understanding the historical seismicity of Nepal'.

Session III: Case Studies

Blandine Ripert: 'Parcelling, privatisation and collective management of space and natural resources on the Salme watershed'.

Satya Shrestha: 'Adaptation of people from a Jumla village to the setting up of the Rara National Park'.

Gérard Toffin in collaboration with Krishna Prasad Rimal: 'Tradition and change among the Balamis of central Nepal'.

Narendra Raj Khanal: 'Population and landscape dynamics in the Nepal Himalayas. A case of the Madi watershed, western Nepal'.

Tristan Bruslé, Monique Fort and Joëlle Smadja: 'A Bocage landscape, Masyam

Ga.Bi.Sa in Palpa District'.

Dilli Ram Dahal: 'Madhese regionalism and national integration: a case of the Nepal Tarai'.

Pierrette Massonnet: 'A short presentation of the CNRS Documentation Centre: Centre d'Etudes Himalayennes.

Himalayan Panels at the 16th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies

Edinburgh, 5-8 September 2000

Three panels with a Himalayan regional focus were convened at the above conference. Two one-day panels were sponsored by the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* (EBHR). These were 'Resistance and the state in Nepal', convened by David Gellner of Brunel University, and 'Himalayan life histories', convened by Michael Hutt of SOAS. In addition to these, a panel on 'Bhutan: socio-cultural parameters and changing times' was convened by Françoise Pommaret of the CNRS, Paris. A fourth panel, on 'Child-focused development discourse and practice in South Asia', convened by Rachel Baker and Rachel Hinton of the University of Edinburgh, also involved a large number of presenters and participants from Nepal.

The panel on **Resistance and the state in Nepal** provided a very useful opportunity for scholars to exchange views on ten years of Nepali democracy, and on the Maoist insurgency which has arisen in the west of the country since 1996. Discussion was wide-ranging, covering topics from the domination of village 'user groups' by local elites to the interpretation of Lakhan Thapa's rebellion in the 19th century. All present benefited greatly from the contributions made by Krishna Hachhethu of the Centre of Nepal and Asian Studies in Kathmandu, who presented a paper on political parties in Nepal, and Dipak Gyawali, RONAST, who provided a fluent and stimulating concluding comment on the day's proceedings. It is hoped to publish the papers in book form. The papers were presented under three headings, as follows :

The state, development, and local politics

Ian Harper and Chris Tarnowski: 'A Heterotopia of Resistance: Health, community forestry, and challenges to state centralization in Nepal'.

Ben Campbell: 'Resisting the Environmentalist State'.

William Fisher: 'The Politics of Difference and the Reach of Modernity: Reflections on the state and civil society in central Nepal'.

Krishna Hacchethu: 'Political Parties and the State'.

The state and ethnic activism

Karl-Heinz Krämer: 'How Representative is the Nepali State?'

Gisèle Krauskopff: 'NGO and Ethnic Associations among the Tharu of the Tarai'.

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine: 'Utopia and ideology among the Magars: Lakhan Thapa versus Mao Dzedong?'

The state and Maoist insurgency

Colin Millard: 'Perceptions of Democracy and Dissent in the Valley of Dhorpatan'.

Judith Pettigrew: 'Guns, Kinship, and Fear: Maoists among the Tamu-mai'.

The seven papers that were presented in the **Himalayan life histories** panel interpreted the theme of the panel in an interesting variety of ways. The lives that constituted their subject matter included those of the last Sherpa painter of traditional thangkas, the earliest Nepali settlers in southern Bhutan, recent Muslim converts in Nepal, an elderly Rana woman who was Nepal's first female lawyer, a prominent Newar Buddhist nun, a participant in the Chipko movement of Garhwal, and a sampling of Rai shamans' remembrances of their calling. The following papers were presented:

Theme 1: Lives as heritage

Eberhard Berg (University of Zurich): 'Gomchen Au Leshey (1900-c.1978): the life of one of the last traditional thangka painters among the Sherpas of Solukhumbu (Northeast Nepal)'.

Michael Hutt (SOAS, London): 'Subversive Histories: the lives of Dalchan and Garjama Gurung'.

Stefanie Lotter (Heidelberg University): 'Mrs. Shah's Boxes'.

Theme 2: Changing identities

Alfiani Fadzakir (Brunel University): 'Internal Conversions: Hidden identities in a Hindu kingdom'.

Sarah Levine (Harvard University): 'Learning, Living, Spreading Dharma, A Post-Modern Journey from Uku Baha, Lalitpur to Hsilai Monastery, Hacienda Heights, California: How Ganesh Kumari Shakya became Bhikkhuni Dhammavati'.

Theme 3: Selfhood and identity

Antje Linkenbach (Heidelberg University): ‘The Relativity of Personhood: Two life stories from Garhwal’.

Martin Gaenszle (Heidelberg University): ‘Life-Journeys: Rai Shamans’ Narratives on their Calling’.

The panel on **Conflict or convergence? Exploring the extent to which South Asian cultural perspectives are embraced within child focused development discourse and practice** was organized by Dr. Rachel Baker, Dr Rachel Hinton and Dr Deepak Behera. The panel exposed a wide diversity of perspectives on the child labour and human rights issues from NGOs, national institutions, academics and journalists. The papers demonstrated that current researchers on childhoods in South Asia are using a range of participatory methodologies and collaborative approaches. Key points raised in the four topics were as follows:

The context of childhood and cultural traditions in South Asia

In her research on child clubs in Nepal, Jasmine Rajbhandary (‘Discovering child rearing and child rights ethno-theories in four villages of Nepal’) observed that despite their relatively high work load, girls are less frequently praised for their work than boys. Boys are given status for the tasks they undertake and more freedom and mobility from a very young age. In view of what is known about the high value that children place on their work contributions, this finding has implications for the decisions made by girls and boys on the type and level of work they undertake. This paper also showed that while research with children in South Asia has attended to cultural context, it has neglected to understand children within their family contexts.

Esa Alaraudanjoki (‘Nepalese Scenario of Working Children under Cultural Conflict’) used some interesting psychological tools to question the risks and possible benefits from work in childhood. He argued that where work is valued, it could be an important part of their development.

Masako Ota (‘Elimination of Child Labour: Poverty-oriented Approach vis-à-vis Education-oriented Approach in rural Andhra Pradesh, India’) highlighted the ongoing dispute as to whether parents’ and children’s decisions about work are made on the basis of economic poverty or educational opportunity. In India, programme approaches to child labour have dichotomised around these two root causes of the problem. Her study showed that despite the initiation of a savings and credit programme, school drop-out rates were increasing.

Different actors, different perspectives

Clare O’Kane’s paper (‘Street and Working Children’s Participation in Programming for Their Rights: Conflicts Arising from Diverse Perspective and Directions for Convergence’) analysed the negative impact of the development projects on children and compared these with more recent attempts to allow street children scope to participate in decisions affecting their lives, for example in the Butterflies project in Delhi.

Sanulal Maharjan’s paper (‘Child Rights and Social Norms’) showed that the transformation of welfare ideology into that of children as rights holders is causing difficulties for INGOs and NGOs working at the local level. He pointed out that the role of the cultural concept of *Karma* (akin to fatalism) in Nepalese understandings of adverse life situations must be recognized in any planning framework for improving human rights.

Shraddha Shrestha (‘Is collaborative research effective for achieving child rights?’) exposed how the varying ideologies of different research organisations influence the questions defined, the sampling process and data produced. This speaks of the urgency of collaborative research if accurate and full understandings of children’s livelihoods is to be achieved.

Sarah Bachman discussed the practical implications of the variable data produced by government, academic and NGO sources. She exposed the powerful impact that reporting in the press can have on policy makers and public opinion. Her case study demonstrated that the negative impact of consumer is often counter to journalists’ best intentions.

The following papers were presented in the panel on **Bhutan: socio-cultural parameters and changing times**, convened by Dr Françoise Pommaret:

John Ardussi and Karma Ura : ‘Population and Governance in mid-18th Century Bhutan, as revealed in the Enthronement Record of Thugs-sprul ‘Jigs-med Grags-pa I (1725-17)’.

Marc Dujardin: ‘From living to propelling monument: the monastery-fortress (*rdzong*) as vehicle of cultural transfer in contemporary Bhutan’.

Lopen Karma Phuntsho: ‘Traditional scholarship in modern Bhutan: current educational trends and their impact on the traditional systems of learning’.

Samten Karmay: 'The traces of Dorje Lingpa (Dorje gling pa 1346-1405) in Bhutan'.

Thierry Mathou: 'The politics of Bhutan: change in continuity'.

Adam Pain and Deki Pema: 'Continuing customs of negotiation and contestation in Bhutan'.

Françoise Pommaret: 'Modern Bhutanese scholarship in human sciences'.

Nicholas Rhodes: 'The monetisation of Bhutan'.

Richard Whitecross: 'Signs of the Degenerate Age: the desecration of chorten and lha khang in Bhutan'.

Abstracts and in some cases the full texts of the papers presented in these panels can be found on the Conference website at

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/sociol/sas/conf16/panels.htm>