

# Report on 'Changing Dynamics of Nepali Society and Politics'

Khem Shreesh

In an attempt to understand the tremendous changes Nepal has undergone in the twenty years since the first restoration of democracy in 1990, an international conference entitled 'Changing Dynamics of Nepali Society and Politics' was held in Kathmandu on 17-19 August, 2011. The conference was hosted jointly by the Alliance for Social Dialogue (ASD), the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies (ANHS) and Social Science Baha (SSB) with the support of the Open Society Foundations and the Swiss Confederation.

There was a preponderance of young and emerging scholars among the paper presenters, although established scholars were also well represented. A total of 31 papers were presented in twelve parallel sessions during the conference, namely: 1) State-building in a 'new' Nepal; 2) Politics of social change; 3) Devolution and local governance: bureaucracy, leaders and popular participation; 4) Identity politics: region, caste and religion; 5) Identity movements and strategies; 6) Civil society, participation and resistance; 7) Nation and culture; 8) Identity politics, conflict and 'new' Nepal; 9) Politics over time and space; 10) State and foreign policy; 11) Market and social change; and 12) Socio-economic changes, compulsions and lives in rural and urban areas. Each session was chaired by a senior scholar and each paper was commented upon by a discussant from a related disciplinary and research background.

Selected individuals from academia, government and research organisations as well as policy makers and young scholars also took part in the deliberations. A couple of Nepal scholars from India were also invited to participate in the conference as a means of continuing our engagement with Nepal's most important neighbour.

In general, the papers focused on the dynamic nature of change in society as an outcome of internal and external interactions, and also on resistance and adaptation to those changes. The Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture 2011, delivered by James F. Fisher, formerly Professor of Anthropology and Asian Studies at Carleton College, Minnesota, set the tone for the conference. Fisher reflected on his four decades of research experience in Nepal and the changes that have occurred in society over this period: the transformation

of rural areas, family structures and politics and society in general, and 'globalisation'. The lecture was based on his original research in Dolpa in the northwest Nepal and his study of Sherpas in the eastern Himalaya, and also from his observation of political figures and their lives in the half century since he began working in Nepal.

Politics was a dominant aspect of the conference, and the papers presented had four broad characteristics. First, while each paper looked at the Nepali state from its own disciplinary standpoint, some papers tried to engage with the Nepali state and society more closely by looking at the rise of ethno-nationalism and its decisive role at the present juncture in Nepal. Such papers looked at the policies and practices of past governments and regimes with an emphasis on representation and recognition, or the lack thereof.

A second recurring theme was federalism and the protracted transition to equitable peace and social justice. The papers and the discussions they provoked focused on various models of federalism and the possible problems posed by them, and on how federalism could invite another round of conflict.

A third approach was to look at the politics of change in terms of mobilisation and the production of identities. Thus, several papers focused on spatiality and regionality, and in particular local politics and their relation to national-level politics. They discussed the rise of identity politics and how the state has attempted to ensure recognition based on ethnicity, caste, region and religion, and focused on how identity movements gained currency in the post-1990 period and momentum during the present period of transition, and have been mediated to some extent by civil society actors and communities who have sought and promoted participation in all spheres of society. They also highlighted the struggles against and resistance to externally imposed constructs and notions.

The fourth feature of many papers was their focus on the social changes brought about by politics, which has undergone change in meaning and substance over time from one dominated by a ruling elite to a broad-based representative democracy. However, minorities still face the obstacles of inadequate representation and a lack of access to services and social justice. Along with socioeconomic change, politics has heralded a promising future for some while for others it represents a continued life of hardship and isolation from family and society.

The conference was also an opportunity to organise plenary public events in the evenings. The first evening was devoted to ‘Sanghiyata ra Yeska Ayam’ (Federalism and Its Dimensions) with two speakers, Mahendra Lawoti and Anil Bhattarai, focusing on two different themes. The second evening saw a discussion based on a presentation on ‘Rajnitik Sankramanma Nepal’ (Nepal’s Prolonged Political Transition: Where Are We Heading?) by Nilamber Acharya, chair of the Constitutional Committee of the Constituent Assembly. The third day saw a panel discussion with scholars working on education deliberating on ‘Shikshyama Chunauti: Ek Bahas’ (Emerging Trends in Education: Challenges and Opportunities).

It is planned to publish papers from the conference in three volumes under the broad themes of ‘state’, ‘identity’ and ‘socio-economic change’.