

The Creation of Public Meaning during Nepal's Democratic Transition: report on two workshops

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Until comparatively recently, Western scholarly work on Nepali society has largely failed to engage with indigenous discourse, mainly because the political economy of scholarship on Nepal conducted outside Nepal has never demanded such an engagement. The print media, television and radio, film and theatre, poetry and popular song, which exist predominantly in Nepali but also increasingly in other Nepalese languages, have been largely omitted from considerations of the immense changes Nepal is undergoing as it emerges from a period of armed conflict and begins to construct the framework for a more representative non-monarchical state. This project explores the ways in which the meaning of socio-political events and developments is constructed, conveyed and consumed in Nepal. It aims to enhance our understanding of the democratic transition in Nepal, foster increased collaboration between foreign and Nepal-based researchers in these fields, and draw the Nepali and international research communities into a new kind of conversation with one another.

The first workshop was held in Kathmandu on 4-5 September 2011. It was hosted by Martin Chautari in its own premises. Thirteen papers were presented over the course of two days. Four papers looked at the media coverage of specific events and issues: Vice President Parmananda Jha's oath-taking in Hindi incident (Alaka A. Chudal, Vienna University), Prashant Tamang's performance in Indian Idol Season III (Harsha Man Maharjan, Martin Chautari), declaration of Nepal as a republic in 2008 (Indra Dhoj Kshetri, Kudos Research) and the drafting of Nepal's

2007 Interim Constitution (Mara Malagodi, SOAS). *Janajati* cinema and magazines were the subjects of papers presented by Martin Gaenzle (Vienna University) and Pratyoush Onta (Martin Chautari) respectively.

Cultural activism through performances by Newars of Kirtipur was analysed by Ingemar Grandin (Linköpings University) while Anna Stirr (Oxford University) focused on commercial folk songs popular among Nepali labour migrants in the Gulf to discuss an intimate public and its 'relationship to gendered ideas of nationhood, unity, difference and inequality.' Writers and readers in Nepal in the most recent years was the topic of the paper by Michael Hutt (SOAS) whereas the history of the image building of Madan Bhandari after his accidental death in 1993 was discussed by Ramesh Rai (Martin Chautari). Rune Bennike (University of Copenhagen) described how erstwhile spatial imaginations of the state had come under challenge in a politically dynamic Limbuwan in recent years. Chandra Laksamba (Centre for Nepal Studies, UK) discussed the creation of public meaning while the Maoist insurgency grew and Amanda Snellinger (Seattle University) analysed the idea of 'consensus as a political ideal' in recent Nepal.

Om Gurung, Shiva Rijal and Dambar Chemjong of Tribhuvan University, other academics such as Meeta S. Pradhan, John Whelpton, Bandita Sijapati, Seira Tamang, and Ramesh Parajuli and journalists and commentators Prashant Jha, Aditya Adhikari, CK Lal, and Khagendra Sangraula were the designated discussants of various papers. Their feedback and those provided by an additional thirty or so participants enriched the quality of discussion during the workshop.

The second workshop was hosted by the Centre of South Asian Studies at SOAS on 4-5 July 2012. Thirteen papers were presented and discussed. Of these, two (an incisive paper on the language of ethnicity by Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka (Bielefeld) and a presentation by Khadija Chennoufi-Gilkes (SOAS research student, Linguistics) of her approach to the content of an online Sherpa community journal) focused on the emergence of a discourse of ethnic identity. Four papers analysed the Nepali media's treatment of specific topics: peacebuilding (Tejendra Pherali, Liverpool JMU); the failed attempt by the then Maoist prime minister to replace Indian pujaris with Nepali pujaris at Pashupatinath temple in 2008 (Johanna Buss, Vienna); the portrayal of Nepali women (Seira Tamang, Martin Chautari) and the royal palace massacre of June 2001 (Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, CNRS, Paris).

Ramesh Parajuli (Martin Chautari) provided some historical depth to the discussion with his analysis of the ways in which the Nepali government attempted to police the print media during an earlier period of political transition, during the 1950s. Rumour and conspiracy theory was the central concern of papers by Mallika Shakya (Pretoria), who described the way in which a series of riots that were sparked off by disparaging remarks about Nepalis supposedly made by the Bollywood star Hritik Roshan played out among the workers in a garment factory in the Nepal Tarai in late 2000; and Michael Hutt (SOAS), who attempted to explain the huge commercial success of the 2007 book *Raktakunda*. In addition to all of this, Monica Mottin (London Met) described the ways in which political dissent has been articulated in recent Nepali theatre, Kailash Rai (Martin Chautari) analysed the content of a selection of memoirs published by women who fought on the Maoist side in the 1996-2006 'People's War', Dan Hirslund (Copenhagen) assessed Maoist political rhetoric in relation to perceived instances of 'corruption', and Laura Kunreuther (Bard College) described the new trend among the Nepali middle class of maintaining archives and producing biographical texts. The designation of a discussant to each paper enriched the workshop greatly; these included David Holmberg and Kathryn March from Cornell, Amanda Snellinger from Seattle, Ingemar Grandin from Linköping, Anne de Sales from Paris, Stefanie Lotter from London, Sondra Hausner from Oxford, Bandita Sijapati from Kathmandu and Chiara Letizia from Milan.

We intend to publish a selection of the papers from the two workshops in forthcoming issues of the Martin Chautari journal *Studies in Nepali History and Society* and in the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*. An edited volume is planned for the longer term.