

***Rethinking the Himalayas*, 2nd Annual Nordic Himalaya Research Network Conference, 9 May 2019, University of Copenhagen**

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On 9 May 2019, the second Annual Conference of the Nordic Himalaya Research Network (NHRN) brought together researchers in the Nordic region and beyond who work on all aspects of research related to the Himalaya region spanning India, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. With the theme of 'Rethinking the Himalayas', the conference offered a platform for scholars of the Himalayas to present their research and was particularly intended to be a supportive meeting point for emerging scholars.

NHRN was established in 2018 with the aim of bringing together scholars from across disciplines who work on this easily overlooked but strategically important region. At the first conference organised by NHRN, scholars situated in the Nordic region came together to discuss strategies for strengthening research in the Himalayas, including identifying a need for creating networking opportunities to foster collaboration and creating platforms for junior scholars to share their innovative research. Based on the conclusions from this first conference, NHRN planned its second annual conference with the specific aim of bringing scholars together to share their research, while especially encouraging junior scholars to participate.

Addressing the theme of the conference, Prem Poddar kicked off with his opening address on 'Waterscapes: Himalayas in the Anthropocene/Capitalocene'. Poddar emphasised the importance of paying attention to climate change in the Himalayas and the need to take into account how the landscape influences and is impacted on by human relations and economic, ie capitalist, dynamics. His argument was that part of the problem of understanding the waterscape in the Himalayas is that water per se eludes elucidation: he therefore proposed to redress this by treating water as a 'hyperobject', borrowing from Morton's thinking about global warming as a hyperobject. He addressed questions of

anxieties and vulnerabilities when it comes to the representation and perception of water in the Himalayas, using the outlook of hyper-objectivity in the Anthropocene. In other words, he asked the question: how would treating water as a 'hyperobject' enable a more insightful and productive understanding of it such that a non-local agential view can be foregrounded? In an age of ecological emergency, locality (any particular part of India or China) is always a false immediacy: in other words, the water in a person's body is seemingly totally separate from the water in the Himalayan glaciers, yet the glaciers are local manifestations of the same hydrological cycle, be it the Indian Ocean or monsoon water.

After these opening remarks, the first session began with a presentation by Abhimanyu Pandey from the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University, who discussed 'Exploring "Connectivity" in a Trans-Himalayan Border Region' in relation to the Spiti Valley, India – which borders Tibet (China) to the east and Ladakh to the north. Pandey reviewed how connectivity was perceived by various actors engaging with the valley – local/regional communities, the government, and tourists, among others; the material forms in which connectivity has been emerging in the valley; and how connectivity has been shaping livelihoods, worldviews, and lifestyles there. In particular, he examined how two roads that were built to connect the Spiti Valley to the rest of India in the 1960s and 70s have affected the valley. He considered how the transformations – political, economic, social, and material – that the roads have been engendering in the valley have not been concomitant with their initial construction in the valley. Pandey shed light on the ways in which larger political, economic, cultural, and technological changes have concatenated together with Spiti's roads to shape the valley's experience of modernity, nationhood, and globalisation.

Next, Siddharth Pandey from Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich, gave a presentation on 'In the Mould of Old, but not Quite: Revisiting the "Britishness" of Himalayan Hill Stations in the Era of Postcolonial Change'. During his talk, he took a close look at the British-established hill stations of India. Widely regarded as a unique experimentation in urban geography during the modern times, the hill stations continue to attract attention today, for both Westerners and

native Indians (residents and visitors alike). Pandey considered how the idea of 'Britishness' in post-independent India has been sustained in these hill stations. He focused on the example of Simla – now Shimla, the most famous hill station of all in the Himalayas of North India, and once the summer capital of the British Empire. He tackled the essence of 'Himalayan Britishness' through the lenses of materiality, aesthetics, affect and politics. Drawing on his experience as an ethnographer, photographic archivist and curator of Shimla (in India and abroad), he presented the complex narratives of adaptation and change by the local people and the government that arise in Shimla due to the highly chequered history of ideas and practices in contemporary India.

Following on from Pandey, Rashmi Upadhyay, an independent scholar at the time, presented 'Memories of Migration among Nepalese Migrant Coal Mine Workers'. Her presentation centred on what she termed 'circular migrant' workers who permanently returned to Nepal after migration to the coal mines of Meghalaya in India. Based on an ethnography of return migration, she focused on Nepalese coal mine migrant workers of the Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya in India and their notion of home and of belonging. She argued that the return home of Nepalese migrant workers was not just the physical act of returning, but that return is a process that triggers constant memories of migration from the past. For Nepalese coal mine workers, 'return' was not always associated with their native village, but rather with the place where they worked and had spent most of their lives, which was evident through the way these migrants collectively remembered their past in their day-to-day lives. Over the course of her stay in the coal-mining labour camps, she discovered that the coal mines of Meghalaya have become an important site for circular Nepalese migrant workers.

Continuing the discussion related to Nepalese labour, Nokmedemla Lemtur from the Center for Modern Indian Studies, Georg-August Universität Göttingen, gave a presentation on 'Understanding Labour Politics in Himalayan Mountaineering Expeditions (1922-1938)'. Lemtur analysed mountaineering expeditions in the early twentieth century, tracing continuities and breaks in colonial policies on recruitment, management and control of labour in the Himalayan region. She drew on archival material and accounts of various expeditions to identify not only labour policy through the regulations enacted by various

colonial state officials and institution like the Himalayan Club (1928), but also the emergence of a claim to a certain kind of work through negotiations and conflict with other indigenous communities that became characteristically identified with the Sherpas. Lemtur examined how mountaineering in the early twentieth century was critical for the consolidation of a Nepalese workforce that served these expeditions.

After a short break for lunch, Tristan Bruslé from the Centre for Himalayan Studies, CNRS, opened the second session with a presentation on 'Small Urban Municipalities in Nepal at a Time of Decentralisation. Production of Laws and Spaces of Living on the Fringes. (A Starting Research Project)'. Bruslé discussed the concept of 'subaltern urbanisation' in relation to a new research project that examines how small towns grow. This research project brings to the fore the voices of people living on the fringes of towns and examines processes of decentralisation as well as the production of norms by local urban bodies. One of this new research project's main fields of inquiry is the unequal access, in terms of jobs and accommodation, to the city in which urban-rural relations entail flows of products and labour.

Min Bhatta from the University of Aberdeen then presented 'Nordic Development Assistance and Promotion of Democracy in Nepal'. He highlighted how Nepal has been one of the many aid recipient countries in the world and, in particular, a target country for Nordic aid and assistance for decades. By examining the evaluation reports from donor countries, he argued that Nepal has largely benefited from foreign aid and assistance. His presentation assessed the extent to which Nordic aid and assistance have helped shape democracy in Nepal today. In addition, he underlined how Danish support for strengthening election systems, proper governance and human rights systems in Nepal has proved a notable accomplishment.

Still in Nepal, Todd Wallenius from Aarhus University, Denmark, presented a paper on 'Wealth, Internationality, and Education as a Commodity in Urban Nepal'. He drew attention to how schools in Nepal have increasingly turned into 'battlefields' owing to their intense vying for students, status and profitability where a multitude of private so-called 'international' schools have emerged. With the global education market as a backdrop, he took a close look at the

nature of class performance, rituals of distinction, educational choices, branded power and the symbolic capital of the 'international'. Based on ethnographic research, he examined how private elite schools have functioned as spaces for class performance, and how the idea of education as a commodity has produced patterns of consumer choice and class formation.

To close the second session, Rajeshwar Acharya from Aarhus University, Denmark, presented his work on 'Analysing Interpersonal Relations and Trust in Educational Aid'. Inspired by new genres of writing related to how the personal and professional selves are intertwined in aid work, Acharya investigated what 'trust' has meant to actors in everyday aid work, especially in the course of educational aid negotiations. He argued that educational aid in Nepal has been embedded in matrices of complex interpersonal relations, blurring dichotomous distinctions between trust/mistrust, formal/informal, and donor/recipient. He urged scholars to investigate educational aid through the lens of narratives produced by actors who have not only different sets of rights and obligations, but also different educational and career trajectories that shape their professional relations and friendships.

After a short coffee break, Trine Brox from the University of Copenhagen opened the third session with her presentation 'From Rotating Sūtra Libraries to Maṇi Fidget Spinners: Development of Devices that Contain and Spin Buddhist Scripts'. With particular attention to Tibetan Buddhism, Brox scrutinised the fascinating development of wheels used in Buddhist practice. Brox zoomed in on the history of devices that contain and spin sacred Buddhist scripts, such as: the Chinese octagonal sūtra library; Tibetan water, air, fire and earth prayer wheels; and contemporary wheel apps, automatized praying machines, and maṇi fidget spinners. Her presentation focused on the most well-known device, the handheld Tibetan prayer wheel that consists of a revolving drum attached to a handle. She explored the ideas that prompted this constant technological development of rotating devices, investigating how Tibetan Buddhists have adopted and further developed a technology that optimises the rotation of sacred scripts, and why rotation has been considered the proper way of interacting with Buddha's doctrine.

Edoardo Paolo Ferrari from Oxford Brookes University continued the discussion of material culture in the Himalayas with his presentation on 'Linking Tangible and Intangible Aspects in the Architecture of Ladakh'. Ferrari investigated the vernacular architecture of Ladakh, and in particular the Dukhang Yokma temple of the Ensa monastic complex in the Nubra Valley. This temple – built in the late nineteenth or possibly early twentieth century – has been the subject of an ongoing study by a team of architects to chart the temple's structural issues in view of its restoration. Along with the structure, Ferrari explored the oral history of the temple and its founder. He explained the reasons underpinning the temple's construction and positioning, which are connected to its material history and structural decay. He argued that the dukhang or temple, which is imbued with important religious as well as other intangible meanings, is an important example of showing how tangible and intangible aspects of architecture are always intertwined.

Last but not least, Judith Müller from Heidelberg University presented a paper on 'Urbanizing Water in Leh, Ladakh: Socio-ecological Dynamics in the Indian Trans-Himalaya'. Müller investigated the way urbanisation processes and limited water availability have created water governance challenges in arid mountain regions, such as in Leh, Ladakh, where snow and glacial melt runoff have been important water sources. As a result, water availability has been subject to high variability throughout the year. Müller highlighted how different uses of water resources by various actor groups has led to conflicting interests. In particular, she showed how agricultural water use has been on the decline as private households have changed their water use habits with a shift towards the tertiary sector, especially tourism, in which a growing amount of freshwater has been used and large volumes of sanitation water have been produced. Müller argued that inhabitants are connected to varying extents to the water grid, with different levels of what she termed 'water citizenship'.

The second annual NHRN conference proved to be an engaging conference in which scholars in the Nordic region and beyond convened to share their research and create networks to foster future collaborations. In response to the call for papers, the organisers received a large number of paper proposals from scholars based in

South Asia, which unfortunately we could not support due to the lack of funds to cover travel expenses. The NHRN conference was supported by the Asian Dynamics Initiative and Roskilde University with only a limited budget to fund travel from within Europe. In the future, we hope that we can bring more scholars from South Asia to the Nordic Region to share their research on the Himalayas. NHRN is planned a third annual conference to take place in conjunction with the fourth annual meeting of the South Asia Across the Nordic Region (SANR) in Copenhagen on 28–29 May 2020, with the hope that more scholars based in South Asia will travel to Copenhagen to share their research on the Himalaya (see <https://cgsas.tors.ku.dk/research-programme/south-asia-across-the-nordic-region-sanr/>). This conference was unfortunately canceled due to Covid-19, and will be rescheduled. For more information about NHRN activities, including future conference updates, please consult the NHRN website: <https://himalayanordic.wordpress.com/>