Human Rights Violations in the Himalayas - the Domination of Elites
6-10 December 1991, Kathmandu

As a result of democratisation in Nepal and the newly gained freedom of speech, it is now permitted to discuss potentially explosive topics in public. Between 6th and 10th of December 1991 in the Hotel Vairaja (Kathmandu), about 300 human-rights activists, environmentalists, politicians, journalists and scientists from all over Nepal, as well as from Ladakh, Garwhal, Sikkim, Bhutan (refugees), Tibet (refugees), Germany, England and the Netherlands met to examine critically human rights problems and the dominance of elites: the meeting was organized by NGO (Nepal Watch)/Berlin, and the Peace Movement Nepal, Lalitpur.

In an unusually free atmosphere there were discussions on human rights and human-rights violations connected with the following topics: environment, health, peace, education, language, access to information, freedom of speech, political participation, women, children, bonded labour, religion, culture, rights of ethnic minorities, land conflicts, racism, foreign aid, foreign media, tourism. From the discussion it became obvious, how much the ethnic minorities (who in some cases are not 'minorities' at all) in the Himalayas feel politically, economically and culturally oppressed. Above all religious elites and the centralist governments in Delhi, Kathmandu, Tashu and Beijing were held responsible for transforming ethnic groups into aliens. Nepal, is the largely unknown fact, of how many ethnic groups there are and their number in relation to the national population. Tamang spokesmen, for example, estimate that they represent 17% of the whole population, and non-Hindus altogether about 75%. In the conference they assert that as long as the Nepalese constitution proclaims Hinduism a state-religion, many people would not reveal that they actually belong to another religion: the disadvantages are too great.

Massive human-rights violations were reported anew from Tibet and Bhutan. In both cases there was no reaction from India or Nepal. In the case of Bhutan there has been no reaction worldwide. About 70,000 Nepalese people here had to flee Bhutan, and it is said that 300 come each day to seek help in the refugee-camps if eastern Nepal. From Tibet also about 300 people escape daily to Nepal, there often being maltreated, extorted and robbed.

The participants at the meeting agreed upon the following statement (interestingly the demands in connection with the situation in Tibet were not reported on). . .

We call on the Governments concerned to ensure equality of all ethnic, social, religious and linguistic groups, and to take appropriate measures to enable members of all these groups to participate fully in society and in decision-making processes. Surveys should be conducted to determine the size and living conditions of the various ethnic groups in the region.

The constitution of any country should not promote, safeguard, or grant preferential treatment to any particular religion.

The right to a healthy environment is the most fundamental of human rights. Governments concerned should take appropriate measures to prevent the further destruction of the environment. We strongly urge Governments to set up environmental courts.

Governments should ensure education is available in the mother tongue of different ethnic groups, at least at primary level. They should make available existing resources, including teachers and materials, to enable this to take place.

Governments in the Himalayan region that do not have a language policy and planning should initiate such measures.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child should be implemented. Special measures should be taken to improve the lives of women and to prevent their continued exploitation.

Communication through the media of announcements, reports and official Government statements should be in the languages of the people.

We call for the increased awareness of, and support for, the plight of the Tibetan people in their struggle for the restoration of their human rights, including the right to self-determination.

The world community should extend support and solidarity to the ongoing movement for human rights, justice and democracy in Bhutan, and should provide relief measures and protection to the refugees in India and Nepal.

The protection and rights of all refugees in the region should be guaranteed under the international laws concerned.

Finally, it was proposed and accepted that a Himalayan Network is established to monitor, promote and document the human rights situation in the Himalayan region. It will be called "Peace Himalaya" with its headquarters in Kathmandu.

Ludmilla Tutting

Society and Culture in the Himalayas
9-11 December 1991, New Delhi

The entire Himalayan region stretching from the Pamirs-Hindukush-Karakoram juncture in the northwest to Arunachal Pradesh in the northeast has attracted scholars, travellers, adventurers and mystics since ancient times. In recent times there has been a revival of interest in this region not only because of its distinct eco-cultural system, historical, socio-economic and scientific character but also due to its increasing geopolitical importance. It was in early 1989 that a group of area specialists and personalities from the Himalayan states of India, namely Sh. T.N. Kaul, former diplomat, Ven. Kushok Bakola, the spiritual personality of the Buddhists of the Himalayas, Sh. Gulam Rasool Santosh, a leading artist from Kashmir, Prof. B.R. Grover, a historian, Prof. K.N. Pandita, scholar of Oriental studies, Prof. K. Warikoo of Jawaharlal Nehru University and a specialist in Central Asian and Himalayan studies and some other experts formed a non-profit voluntary organisation - Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation - at New Delhi. The Foundation is engaged in systematic, in-depth and micro-studies of history, culture, art and literature, social structures, economic, geopolitical and other issues pertinent to the Himalayan and...
pertaining to the Himalayan and adjoining regions in a holistic manner adopting an inter-disciplinary approach.

The Foundation organized a three day National Seminar on "Society and Culture in the Himalayas" at the Jwaharlal Nehru University Campus, New Delhi (India) from December 9 to 11, 1991. Attracting widespread participation from specialists and cultural personalities from the Himalayan states of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh hills and Jammu and Kashmir, the seminar was the first such organized initiative in India to involve experts from the grass roots with an established disciplinary specialisation connected with the Himalayan and adjoining Central Asian regions. The seminar provided a forum for scholars, literati and cultural personalities from the entire Himalayan region to share their experiences and opinion with leading social and natural scientists from Jwaharlal Nehru University and other institutions. The deliberations of the seminar were organized in 5 technical sessions covering almost all aspects of the society and culture in the Himalayas in a thematic manner. More than twenty-five research papers were presented and discussed in the seminar and important recommendations were adopted at the concluding session.

In the first session which focussed on "ecological and geopolitical perspectives of the Himalayas", three keynote presentations were made. Prof. P.S.Ramakrishnan, of the School of Environmental Sciences, JNU made case studies of Kumaon, Garhwal, Sikkim Himalayas and the north-eastern hills thereby illustrating linkages between ecological, social and cultural dimensions of development process. Dr. A.R. Yousuf, Reader in Kashmir University explained the changes in the ecology of Kashmir Himalayas which is occurring due to adverse impact of modernisation. The geopolitical imperatives of the Himalayas were analysed in detail by Sh.T.N. Dhar, president of Lucknow based voluntary organisation SHERPA.

About ten papers were presented in the second session which dealt exclusively with the "Himalayan society and culture in a historical perspective". The participation of a learned delegate from Mongolia, Mr. Jigdjidin Byamba, Member Parliament and Dy. Chairman of Association of Mongolian Free Writers, who discussed the cultural and historical ties between peoples of The Indian Himalayas and Mongolia lent an international character to this seminar. Prof. Grover explained the methodology and approach to the study of Western Himalayan history and culture during the medieval times. Whereas Prof. K.N. Pandita's paper dealt with the contribution of Kashmir to Indian culture, Prof. P.N. Pushp analysed the importance of Kashmir as the crucible of cultural interaction. Dr. R.P. Khatana highlighted the dilemma faced by the Gujars in Jammu and Kashmir over the past few years. Similar case studies on Sikkim Society and culture and Adi tribes of Arunachal Pradesh were made by Dr. Aparna Bhattacharya of Calcutta University and Dr. Tamo Mibang, of Arunachal University respectively. The participants were enthralled by the range and depth of case studies presented and discussed in the seminar, particularly when these were made by scholars who have spent their life times in this field.

The third session, "Himalayan frontiers in recent history", witnessed lively discussion. Whereas John S. Lall, former Dewan of Sikkim gave his opinion on the Sino-Indian border in the western sector, Mr. A.K. Ray, former diplomat shed interesting light on the strategic aspects of the Himalayan frontiers of India. Dr. Warikoo provided a historicopolitical perspective of Kashmir's relationship with its frontier territories. A Tibetan scholar from Sarnath, Acharya Jampa Samten gave a biographical account of Dorjeeff, the key person involved in Anglo-Russian-Tibetan frontier diplomacy during the Curzon years. This session was marked by intense debate on various strategic and political issues involving the Himalayan frontiers of India and the participation of three former diplomats in the deliberations lent a special character to the seminar.

"Modernisation and change in the Himalayas" formed the theme of discussions in the fourth session. The problems of changing society and cultural dilemmas faced by Ladakhis at present were analysed by Prof. Harjeet Singh of JNU. Similar case studies about the impact of modernisation on the society and culture of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim and Himachal Pradesh were made by Dr. S. Dutta (Arunachal University), Dr. Anand Kumar (JNU), Dr. Yashi Choudhary (Gangtok), Dr. Pamela Kanwar (Shimla) and several others. The face to face interaction between experts from the Himalayan region and well known social scientists helped them in a better understanding of the problems and issues related to Himalayan society and culture.

The Seminar participants deliberated in detail various resolutions before the same were finally adopted. The seminar called upon the central government and concerned Himalayan state governments to initiate steps for preservation of rich and variegated cultural heritage of the Himalayan region. It urged upon the government to fulfill the cultural aspirations of the hill people on support specific result oriented programmes recommended by the Himalayan research and cultural Foundation in order to accelerate the process of social development keeping due regard for local milieu, needs and cultural quest.

The proceedings of this Seminar are expected to be published soon. For further details write to: Dr. K. Warikoo (Secretary, Himalayan Research and Cultural Foundation), Associate Professor, Central Asian and Himalayan Studies, Jwaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi - 110067.

K. Warikoo


This seminar, convened jointly by the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and the French Embassy in Kathmandu, intended to present recent scientific results, discuss methodological problems and raise several issues on the anthropology of Nepal. Three areas of research were explored.

1. Urban studies. In his paper, "Buddhism as seen through Svayambhu Purana", Kamal P. Malia showed the importance of this religious text in Newar Buddhism. He analyzed the genesis of the Svayambhu Purana in the particular context of the Kathmandu valley, and its different sources, especially Indian. Annick Hollé, Gerard
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3. Anthropology and Development. Mangal Siddhi Manandhar and Caltanya Misra presented the CNAS research programme on the remote areas and their study in West Nepal. Corneille Jest presented the Gulmi-Argha Khanci CNRS project which was launched in late 1985. Both papers questioned the relevance of basic research for development and decision-makers. To be sure, besides raising heritage consciousness in the different ethnic groups, the anthropologist can be a link between tradition and change. Prayag Raj Sharma expressed the view that road construction is not a correct indicator of development in the remote areas. On the other hand, Denis Blamont, a geographer himself, gave a paper on "Demographic growth, natural constraints and the diversification of the rural productions systems: Bajhang, Jumla, and Dhading-Rasuwa". He emphasized the recent standardization of crop systems all over the Hills of Nepal, from West to East. By and large, this trend encompasses the ethnic boundaries.

Gopal Singh Nepali and Prayag Raj Sharma played a vigorous role in the debate and all the discussions. G.S. Nepali, who spoke on "The role of anthropology in Nepal", outlined the need of theoretical training for Nepalese anthropologists. Referring to the great amount of anthropological studies published in French by CNRS scholars, P.R. Sharma urged these works be translated in English.

In closing, Dyuti and Isvar Baral (Central Dept. of Sociology, TU/Royal Nepal Academy) presented the new official policy concerning cultural pluralism. In fact, since the promulgation of the new constitution, which explicitly guarantees the right of every community to conserve and to promote its language and culture, an unprecedented situation arose. The controversial question of the interrelationship between national identity and minority cultures was posed and passionately discussed by participants.

Seven French films on the anthropology of Nepal were shown. Most of these films were made in the 1970s and can now be considered as historical documents.

The papers will be published by the French Cultural Centre, Kathmandu.

Gérard Toffin

Journey through a Century: A Tale of the two Cities, 7-28 May 1992, Kathmandu

The recently held photo exhibition on "Images of a City: The Old Townscape of Kathmandu and Patan: 1910-1992" was a memorable social event in Kathmandu. A distinguished gathering of elites from various walks of life had assembled on the occasion of its inauguration on May 7, 1992. The guest of honour invited to address this inaugural function was no less a person than the Nepali Congress Party supremo, Mr. Ganesha Singh. The pictures made a vivid documentation of the towns of Kathmandu and Patan as they have changed and transformed themselves under the impact of 'development' and 'modernization' in Nepal over the past eighty years or so. It was jointly organized by the Nepal Heritage Society and the Urban Development through Local Efforts Project (UDLE) in Nepal. To have thought of such a theme was a commendable act in itself, since it was perhaps the first exhibition of its kind. The show was made possible by the energy, ingenuity and resourcefulness of a small but active band of persons consisting of Nepalese, Germans and some other nationals working in Nepal. That the exhibition was a tremendous success can be easily deduced from the keen public response it evoked in Kathmandu, both among native and foreign audience. There was a record number of visitors to the exhibition during the entire three-week duration for which it remained open in the Birendra Art Gallery at the Balmandir building in Naxal. The organizers deserve our sincere praise and appreciation, as well as our gratitude.

The objective of the exhibition, described in the printed handout, was 'to create awareness of the changes taking place in Kathmandu and Patan in this century. Visitors to the exhibition could get enough of an idea of the extent of this change through the eyes of the camera in a most telling manner.

Unfortunately, all this change in the character and appearance of the town is not for the better. I am inclined to think that all these physical changes not only affect the architecture and style of individual house-making, but also alter the street scenes, the character of temple, public squares, monuments, open spaces, the city skyline - in short - the ambience and plan of these two towns as a whole.

The organizers disclaim any idea that their aim in putting together the
exhibition lay in ‘glorifying a past’. This apolectic tone on its part has been
depicted probably by the fact that the
exhibition was made concentrating
chiefly on the ‘politically oppressive’ and ‘economically exploitive’ Rana
period of Nepal’s history (1846-1950).
This explanation was quite unnes-
sary, in my opinion, because the focus of
nostalgic quality about which it comes
to acquire with due intervention of time.
This is what has happened also in
the case of the present Rana period
exhibition. Watching the photographs of
the exhibition has been a moving expe-
rience, especially to those people who
grew up and spent their childhood in
these towns. The now vanished face
of Kathmandu looks so quiet, tranquil and
placid - what one would like to have
once again - in these pictures.
This feeling gets far acuter, as the harried
denizens of Kathmandu try to cope with
their life in an over-crowded, over-
polluted and traffic-choked city.
Altogether, 137 black and white
photographs in frames were put on
display, hanging them on the walls of
the large, spacious rooms of a former
Rana palace. Photos were taken from
the old box camera on a tall wooden
stand, using glass negatives. The
subjects covered by these photographs
have included i) the street scenes, ii)
vernacular architecture, iii) Rana palace
architectures and gardens, iv) religious
and secular monuments, such as
temples, stupas, river-banks (Nep.
ghari) and Durbar squares, Clock tower
(ghantaGhar) and the Dharamara, v) the
shots of the town damaged by the earth-
quake of 1934 and those during recon-
struction, vi) festivals and peasants,
vii) the Bagmati river and viii) ordinary
people and soldiers in their normal
dress and uniforms.

Nowadays, it is more common to
find the admirers of old and by-gone
things among higher business classes
and noveau rich class of Kathmandu.
The concern for heritage preservation is
also expressed more strongly by these
people. It should, however, be remem-
bered that the pace and direction of ‘development’ on which they put the
blame for Kathmandu’s plight today, is
the work of their hand to some extent.
The ‘development’ creed earlier suited
and favoured them up to a point. Hotel
trade and tourism in Kathmandu has
thrived by selling the idea of modern
luxury and comfort concealed beneath
the so-called cultural surface. It is they
who are responsible for reducing a
living culture into a piece of drawing-
room decoration and its cheap commod-
ization. They would themselves live
in the suburban residential areas and
lament the loss of heritage in the inner
cities. But an awareness in these matters
from whatever direction is a desirable
thing to have.

The amorphous change and rude
transformation of Kathmandu, which
the exhibition was well able to capture,
however, gives little cause for rejoicing.
There is so much thoughtlessness and
lack of planning in everything going on
in Kathmandu lately. The pace of
construction and unplanned urban
growth is simply mind-boggling. This
follows no defined order and system.
There are no guiding norms or rules for
regulating the urban development of
Kathmandu. The supply of basic civic
amenities and minimum of hygiene are
threatened.

In this background one cannot but
adore the Rana rulers who showed a
greater appreciation for the idea of a
planned Kathmandu town, and gave
evidence of a high urban aesthetic taste
and orderliness to it. Looking at the
picture of the Juddha Road, the new
Town-Hall and Nepal Bank buildings,
the Bhugol Park, the uniformly designed
row of houses at Indrachowk, the New
Road gateway arch, the respect shown to
the lay-out of Tundikhel, etc., one is
struck by the presence of an unmistak-
able desire for planning, aesthetics and
urban order, when this portion of the
town was rebuilt after the earthquake
of 1934. Some of the more pretentious
buildings, like those of the Town-Hall
and the Nepal Bank, were laid out on
spacious premises with open grounds in
front, fenced off by elegant wrought
iron railings. Today we know how little
respect Kathmandu gives to open, public
spaces. More than anybody, the govern-
ment and the corporations established
by it are the greatest encroachers of
public grounds. If we had only the sense
to preserve the sanctity of this older
Rana period town-planning, at least the
New Road and Tundikhel area would
have done us proud today. The curse of
Kathmandu, therefore, is not its ‘devel-
opment’ or ‘modernization’, as some
people would like us to believe, but the
haphazard method of doing things,
which I call pseudo-modernization. If
anything can redeem Kathmandu as a
town, it is an even more modernized,
efficient and orderly approach.

The many religious and secular
structures adorning the towns of Kath-
mandu and Patan yesterday, individu-
ally may or may not have been in an
ideal state of preservation, but they
were certainly endowed with a dignity
and atmosphere befitting them, because
of plenty of open and unencroached
open spaces surrounding them. The
exhibition brings us this moral amply
clearly. The tragedy of Kathmandu
today is that we have neither any
energy, nor a collective will, nor the urge
to be locally resourceful - so much that
we do not even show cognizance of our
most pressing problem - to check and
put some order to our chaotic urban
growth. The exhibition, I am sure, has
succeeded in putting such questions into
the minds of many onlookers. The
success of the exhibition must be
regarded to lie precisely here. Not to let
its usefulness go to waste or fade into
quick forgetfulness, it would be profit-
able, in my opinion, to bring out a cata-
logue of this exhibition with a short text
and small-sized illustrations of the
exhibited photos alongside it, so that its
contribution to the public becomes more
lasting and permanent.

Prayag Rai Sharma

Oral Traditions and Literature in
Nepal,
22 May, 1992, Kathmandu

A growing interest in studies on oral
literature among Western scholars
became apparent with the formation of
the Oral Tradition Study Group during
the Franco-German conference on
the Anthropology and History of Nepal in
Arc-et-Senans in 1990. To explore the
field and assess the ‘state of the art’ in
Nepal itself, where in the changed poli-
tical context there is a renewed aware-
ness about the multilingual heritage and
cultural diversity of the country, the
South Asia Institute, Kathmandu Branch
Office, organized a one-day seminar on

The objective was to convene
scholars who - in one way or another
work in the field of oral tradition
studies, to discuss research findings,
methodological problems and practical
aspect. It turned out that such a forum of discussion was indeed felt to be necessary, as interested scholars are spread in various different departments, or are not in the university at all. Significantly the interest was not only guided by academic questions but also by a genuine concern for the preservation of a cultural heritage. Maybe it was also symptomatic that among the Nepali contributors there were several poets, but no anthropologists. As Prof. D.P. Bhandari emphasized in his inaugural address, it is quite a different thing whether an oral tradition is "lived" or whether it is made an object of study. And it was perhaps one of the special characteristics of the seminar that several of the contributors spoke about traditions of which they themselves are - to some degree - still a part.

The papers focussed on the unique, rich, and multifunctional character of the various oral genres, such as myths, tales, songs and proverbs.

Prof. Krishna Chandra Mishra (Department of Hindi) in his paper on "Oral Tradition and Literature, with special focus on the Mid-eastern Tarai area, gave a short historical sketch of the role of oral traditions in South Asian religions. He pointed to the importance of oral transmission of Vedic knowledge (e.g. ātri) in the earlier periods, when writing was still viewed with scorn. In later times, the orthodox scholars tended to look down on oral traditions, though these have always influenced the scriptures. That many folk cults of the 'people' (loka) gradually find a place in the written traditions can be observed in the Tarai region to this day. But numerous forms of orally transmitted knowledge, some of which have an important educational value, are as yet unrecorded.

Sueyoshi Toba's paper on the "World View in the Khaling Creation Myth" was a vivid exemplification of the existential importance which oral traditions have for many ethnic groups in Nepal. Mr. Toba emphasized that for the Khaling Rai, as expressed in the creation stories, the universe is animated (which can also be deduced from grammatical markers) and largely anthropomorphous. His paper presented the myths of origin in its consecutive order: from the separation of heaven and earth, through various episodes like the story of the First Women who is in need of a husband and gives birth to the various species, to the migration of the ancestors to the present settlements.

Vairagi Kahila, member of the Royal Nepal Academy and a poet who is known for his association with the "Third Dimension" literary movement in the 60s, gave a paper (in Nepali) on the Limbu tongsing mundhum. The full ritual recitation and enactment of these oral texts, which recount the origin of man and society, lasts for three days (the recording is 30 hours long). He stressed that though the phedangma (tribal priest) is regarded as higher in the ritual hierarchy, it is the samba or yeba/yema who is in charge of reciting the tongsing mundhum. This was exemplified by ritual invocations and the metaphors and idioms used to chase away Nahen, the Spirit of Jealousy.

Also Prof. Satya Mohan Joshi (Department of Newari) gave his paper in Nepali, which was clearly conducive to his style of presentation. As he spoke on "Folk Drama in Lalitpur. Social Humour and Satire" his contribution could not escape giving examples of the joking exchanges which are enacted during the Kārttik nāc. This little known drama festival, which takes back more than 300 years to the time of the Patan ruler Siddhinarasimha, is staged by lay actors and lasts for several days. The humorous dialogues, as Prof. Joshi pointed out, are full of caricature and criticism, both of society and oneself.

Tulsi Divas, also a poet, who has published a collection of folk stories from all over Nepal at the Royal Nepal Academy some twenty years ago, presented a paper on "Nepalese Folk Tales about Specific Traits of Human Character" based on the aforementioned material. He, too, stressed the humorous side of these stories as well as the social meaning which is conveyed through them. Distinguishing between tales of cleverness, of foolishness, and of greed and stinginess, he showed that these narratives all serve to uncover not only individual shortcomings but also the holiness of social formalities and injustice of economic imbalances.

Dr. Ram Dayal Rakesh (Department of Hindi) spoke on Maithili proverbs, pointing out the social and cultural meanings which they have. He gave various examples, classifying them according to their content (like proverbs relating to other social groups), and stressed that the most important thing in using a proverb in speech is using it wittily at the right time (for example in court to defend one's case). Thus, it is not enough to collect proverbs, but it is also necessary to study the context of their application - which methodologically is not unproblematic.

Finally, Prof. Cuda Mani Bandhu (Department of Nepal) presented a paper on the "Use of Oral Traditions in Education." He emphasized that orally transmitted songs, tales, riddles and proverbs have already had an important educational value. Since the beginning of the century folk stories and songs were included in school books in Nepal, but they were later reduced under a new education policy during the Panchayat time. As Prof. Bandhu pointed out, many editions lack a sound methodology, which often leads to a distortion rather than a preservation of these traditions. Thus he warned that the genuine nature of folklore may eventually be destroyed by 'faking'.

Though the papers could only give glimpses of the numerous oral traditions in Nepal - as there were, for example, no contributions on Tibetan groups, Tamang, Magar, Gurung etc. - the richness of this type of cultural heritage became evident. It was generally felt necessary that such a meeting should be repeated, possibly on a broader scale (involving more foreign scholars), and the suggestion was brought up to found a Folklore Society to encourage and coordinate further collections and study of oral traditions all over Nepal.