

NEWS

Nepal-Human Ecology Programme

Nepal in the early 1990s is a very poor country struggling to overcome a set of interrelated crisis-promoting processes; for example, rapid population growth (official growth rate of 2.4% per year, probably closer to 3%), low level of investment in industrial production, 90% of population dependent on agriculture, indications of overexploitation and serious soil erosion in the densely populated and vulnerable hill areas (where 30% of cultivated land supports 60% of the country's rural population), political instability and little governmental capacity to pursue longterm economic policies, increasing dependence on foreign aid, and ad hoc, short-term crisis management.

Destabilizing processes caused by human resource utilization are frequently seen in total deforestation and irreversible erosion of hill slopes, lowered crop productivity (in terms of yield per unit area and of contribution to GNP) and an increasing percentage of subsistence farmers with nutrient intakes below minimum acceptable levels.

However, these doomsday scenaria are now increasingly being challenged by researchers from different disciplines. The overarching objective of the programme is to contribute to more adequate conceptualization of the interplay between processes in nature and processes in society. Such conceptualization has to tackle the problem of integrating socio-cultural and political administrative processes within an overall ecosystem approach. This obviously will require contributions from several disciplines.

The programme seeks to realize its main objective through coordination of activities within two main sub-programmes: a) Tribhuvan-Bergen Human Ecology Research and Teaching Programme and b) Resource systems, Human Ecology Programme Nepal. In addition, individual student fellowships have been awarded as part of the overall activities in Nepal.

a) Tribhuvan-Bergen Human Ecology Research and Teaching Programme

This programme which was founded by NUFU, tries to contribute to the overall objective through a joint Tribhuvan-Bergen research and training programme. The original programme proposal argued for methodological procedures characterized as "progressive contextualization", i.e. starting the investigation by focusing on significant people-environment interactions and then searching for gradually more comprehensive explanations of these interactions by placing them in progressively wider or denser contexts.

The programme started as planned in July 1993 with disciplinary inputs from anthropology and archaeology. In anthropology, the teaching component includes supervision of 9 MA (per year) and 2 Ph.D. students (for the programme period). In archaeology, the teaching component includes supervision of 8 MA students and 2 Ph.D. students (for the programme period) in archaeological field excavations of Neolithic and early Iron Age sites.

b) Resource Systems, Human Ecology Programme Nepal

This programme attempts to link up the Tribhuvan-Bergen Human Ecology Programme with related research activities by Norwegian staff and students.

Participation of students and staff members from Tribhuvan University together with staff members and students from Bergen (funded from other sources) in a Human Ecology-focused research programme is of fundamental importance for the programme's approach to competence-building. Empirically, this research programme is focused on two regions: the Kali Gandaki river system and the Dang valley in Central-Western Nepal and the Tamur and Arun river systems in Eastern Nepal.

One project on vegetation ecology has been started in the Middle Hills (by O.R. Vetaas). It will focus on the utilization of oak forest and the consequences for biodiversity, field-layer composition, and fodder value. There are few studies on vegetational changes in Nepal, although deforestation is highlighted by many other authors. This study attempts to use some of the methods applied in the Indian Himalayas adjacent to West Nepal so as to give a comparative perspective for the Nepalese Himalayas. The project is also expected to train a few MSc. students from the Botany Department, Tribhuvan University (Nepal).

Gunnar Håland, Ole Reidar Vetaas, Tore Nesheim

Workshop on "Bagmati - A Living Museum?" Kathmandu, October 21, 1994

For more than two years now, the Goethe-Institut in Kathmandu has affiliated itself with various groups and projects whose common objective is to rehabilitate Bagmati river and its surroundings. This effort has focused specifically on the area between Teku and Thapathali, on both sides of the river.

That area has to be considered of great significance, both in regard to Nepal's cultural heritage and with respect to environmental protection and balanced urban development in the future. Up to now, the area has been completely neglected, with the consequence that its cultural treasures are disintegrating, the *ghāts* are shunned by worshippers, *sattals* no longer serve pilgrims but rather homeless families, land is being illegally encroached upon, and above all, the Bagmati is turning ever more into an open sewerage.

With this in mind, the Goethe-Institute and the "Bagmati Rehabilitation Trust Fund" jointly organised this workshop. A two-fold action plan was discussed:

- (a) to develop strategies for the culturally sensitive and educationally sound promotion of tourism in the area - such "tourism" to comprise foreigners and especially the local populace; school children, university students, scholars, and even politicians;
- (b) to involve the existing museums of the Kathmandu Valley in this ongoing experience, i.e. "learning by doing", that will be professionally supervised and guided by a German expert in museology over various phases.

Since the interests of the groups involved, i.e., locals and governmental authorities, differ from each other, a sound and common basis of mutual trust and cooperation had to be reached. Concerning the question of which steps were necessary to coalesce the different interest groups, four areas of action were identified:

- (1) The four wards, being in charge of the area, as well as the M.E.I.P. (Metropolitan Environmental Improvement Project), and the mayors of Kathmandu and Patan, will be assisted to work towards a comprehensive project-proposal. The exact boundaries and the channeling of the river and methods to fight water pollution shall all be subjects of discussion.
- (2) Legal protective measures have to be initiated by creating an "Environmental-Monumental Zone".
- (3) It is indispensable to come to terms with Guthi Samsthan and its policies of neglecting its duties, underpaying its caretakers, and selling off land, etc. One way to have a better understanding of the Guthi doings in the area would be to require the Guthi head-offices to come up with a "Guthi Land Holding Map". This map then could be compared with other cadastral and private guthi maps. Possible differences should lead to a better understanding of where and why these differences arise.
- (4) The idea of the "Living Museum" was presented for the target area.

Responsibilities for immediate action taking follow these four target aspects. They have been divided between Dr. Susanne von der Heide, Mr. Christian von Hatzfeldt, and Mr. Dr. Saphalya Amatya.

Report on the Symposium

"The Wild Goddess in South Asia" Berne and Zurich, November 3-5, 1994

This international symposium, convened by Axel Michaels, Annette Wilke (Institute of Religious Studies, University of Berne) and Cornelia Vogelsanger (Ethnological Museum of Zurich University), dealt with the wild and untamed aspect of goddesses in India and Nepal. The meeting also concluded the Kālī-Exhibition at the Ethnological Museum in Zurich. Publication of the contributions is planned in the series *Studia Religiosa Helvetica* (vol. 2).

The first day was devoted to the Himalayas, with predominantly ethnological contributions on Bhairava (Elisabeth Chalier-Visuvalingam, Paris-Budapest), the Navadurgās (Niels Gutschow, Abtsteinach-Kathmandu, and Gérard Toffin, Paris), Guhyeśvarī (Axel Michaels, Berne), Hārātī (Brigitte Merz, Heidelberg-Kathmandu) as well as Draupadī and Kuntī (William Sax,

Christchurch). In the evening a public film was shown on the cult of the Living Goddess (Kumārī) in Nepal, with an introduction by Gérard Toffin.

The second day focused on art-history and philological topics. The papers dealt with Kālī (Rachel Fell-McDermott, New York, and Andrea Loseries, Graz), the role of demi-goddesses like the Ḍākinīs and Śākinīs (Adelheid Hermann-Pfandt, Marburg), an elaborate ritual for Dantēśvarī (Cornelia Mallebrein, Tübingen) as well as wall paintings of goddesses in Orissa (Eberhard Fischer, Zurich). The day was concluded with text-related contributions on Caṇḍikā and other goddesses in the Kathāsaritsāgara (Fabrizia Baldissera, Naples), on martial aspects of the goddess in the Tripurarahasya (Silvia Schwarz Linder, Milan) and on the taming of the goddess in Śaṃkara-legends (Annette Wilke, Berne).

On the last day - in Zurich - presentations dealt mainly with South Indian topics, such as the relationship between violence and gender of the deities and their devotees (Heidrun Brückner, Tübingen), and the meaning of the number of eyes of goddesses (Evelyne Masalimani-Meyer). This was followed by a short working report on the Kālikāpurāṇa by Sylvia Wendt.

This conference was the first concerned with the goddesses of South Asia to take place in Europe. The main focus was not on general issues, such as goddesses and women or the feminist debate on the goddess. (Interestingly, the topic is still examined mainly by female scholars, as was the case in this conference). The value of the unpublished contributions rather lay in the in-depth studies of local traditions, which in a comparative perspective evinced surprising similarities and congruities even in minor details. This was the case, for example, with respect to the function of the sword, which many goddesses carry, or the meaning of the eyes.

There was no singular comprehensive result of the conference that could be ascertained, but that was not its aim. Nevertheless, it was apparent from the discussions that the theoretical analysis of goddesses in South Asia can no longer be made with simplistic, rather static dichotomies and oppositions, paradoxes and ambivalences (pure-impure, benevolent-malevolent, *ugra-saumya*, etc.). Rather it turned out, on a closer view, that goddesses have both aspects, or move back and forth between the extremes: Kālī may become milder, others may (also under political influences) become wilder.

Axel Michaels

