

Report on the 9th BNAC Nepal Study Day, April 2011, University of Cambridge

The 2011 Britain-Nepal Academic Council (BNAC) Nepal Study Day was the largest and longest in the event's nine-year history. Held at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (CRASSH) at the University of Cambridge, with additional support from the Centre of South Asian Studies and the Kosciuszko Trust, the two-day event on 20-21 April 2011 provided a platform for over 30 researchers and as many participants to present and discuss their work in Nepal.

Thanks to the momentum generated at previous Nepal Study Days held at Durham, Edinburgh, SOAS, UCL and Oxford, we received an unusually high number of excellent abstracts, most of which we were able to accommodate in a packed schedule. As convenors, we were particularly pleased by the large number of UK-based Nepali students and scholars who participated, and by the level of interest shown by colleagues in neighbouring European countries who attended.

Presentations ranged across the social sciences, natural sciences, humanities and professional fields such as development studies and public health. There were contributions from researchers at all levels, including Masters and PhD students, post-docs, teaching faculty and practitioners. By asking presenters to stick to a strict time schedule of 20-minute presentations, we were able to allow 10 minutes for discussion after each paper. The regular coffee and tea breaks, along with lunches, a conference dinner and a convivial reception hosted by the Centre of South Asian Studies provided further opportunities for relaxed discussion, and enabled students to meet with senior researchers in an informal manner and discuss their projects.

Themes of shared concern emerged across disciplines, with participants finding exciting points of connection with each other's work. A number of the papers in some way addressed Nepal's ten-year civil conflict and its aftermath, with presentations focusing on the experiences of child soldiers, widows and the families of the disappeared, as well as a concluding paper on conflict literature. Another set of presentations converged around the theme of the mobility and the growing Nepali 'Diaspora', not only in neighbouring India, but now in Europe and the UK as well. Other presenters focused on specific notions of politics, development, secularism, social work, public

health and education through case studies across Nepal, and their relevance for regional and trans-regional debates. The localisation of appropriate information technology for good governance and information dissemination was another new research focus. Papers on modern historical themes that explored the development of music, social science journals, radio, nursing and political movements over the last half-century were complemented by an archaeological report on pre-modern trans-Himalayan movements.

These diverse presentations demonstrated that Nepal Studies is a dynamic and growing field of research, engaged in many issues of concern to broader scholarly and policy communities. It was also clear that such empirical research in Nepal has much to contribute to larger disciplinary and area studies debates. At the same time, in the course of the two days, it became evident that this Nepal-focused forum provided an opportunity for deep discussion around shared experiences of a particular place at a transformative moment in its political history, underscoring once again the importance of fostering knowledge grounded in regional expertise—an increasingly endangered agenda in Western academic contexts.

The smooth running of the Cambridge Nepal Study Day owes a great deal to the energy and effort of Claire Wheeler and Ruth Rushworth, both based at CRASSH, and to the financial support provided by the Kosciuszko Trust, which enabled the convenors to provide travel bursaries to all student presenters. We were particularly pleased that bringing so many researchers interested in Nepal to Cambridge has helped to create a positive and lasting impression of our field among our University colleagues. As an administrator at the Centre of South Asian Studies noted in an email after the fact, 'It was clear from the first moment that this is an amazing group that really all get on with each other very well and share a genuine common interest... Normally we have the odd awkward silence and need to push people into talking, but not at all with your group—it seems that you are developing a real and dynamic academic community.' With that, we pass the baton to our colleagues at the Centre for Nepal Studies UK, who have generously offered to host the next Nepal Study Day in Reading and we look forward to an enjoyable, diverse and lively event.

For more information about the programme and a full list of abstracts, please visit the following website: <www.crash.cam.ac.uk/events/1580/>.

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