

A photograph of a modern, two-story building with a light-colored facade and a covered entrance, surrounded by lush green trees and a paved walkway. The sky is blue with some clouds.

# CHAUTARI QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

## No. 3 | October–December 2023

### **MANGALBARE DISCUSSION SERIES COMPLETES 32 YEARS**

**By Pratyoush Onta**

The Tuesday discussion series of Martin Chautari—affectionately called *Mangalbare*—completed 32 years of continuous operation in late October 2023. It was started in October 1991 by a group of individuals that included the Nepali energy expert Bikash Pandey, the Norwegian electric engineer Odd Hoftun (1927–2023) and his social scientist son Martin Hoftun (who died in an aircraft accident in 1992). The objective of these founders was to create a forum to allow development professionals, social activists, journalists and academics to hold informed dialogue about development and democracy in Nepal. Coming after the end of the 30-year King-led Panchayat regime, they wanted to open up Nepali public life in ways that were not possible earlier.

Initially, *Mangalbare* used to be held every other Tuesday in Bikash Pandey's office in Kamaladi, Kathmandu. During the first year, the number of participants would be between five and ten individuals. By mid-1994, the discussion venue had moved to the Thapathali area of Kathmandu, and it has been held there ever since. In 1997, *Mangalbare* became

a weekly series. Also important to note is that even after Martin Chautari got registered as a separate organization in 2002, *Mangalbare* series per se has not been a directly funded activity of the organization.

What has been achieved in these 32 years? Speaking for myself, the learnings involved in organizing and attending a *guff* series have been invaluable. For someone who grew up in Kathmandu and cannot claim great familiarity with many parts of the country, I have learnt a lot from the various speakers who have come to talk about something about which they know a lot more than I do. I assume that the other participants over the years have probably felt the same way. I would also suggest that the continuous exchange of ideas have probably contributed to the emergence of a public sphere beyond the patronage of the Nepali state and the development industry.

### **PORTABLE LESSONS**

I consider such *guff* series to be very important for the daily life of any society with democratic aspirations. In particular, such conversations should be at the core of anyone's definition of what a *loktantrik* society should or can be. But I am not an expert on the theory of democracy. Hence, I will keep it simple by asking a basic question: After 32 years of operation, what have we learned that might be useful for



Discussion being held in the older seminar hall at MC Premises. Participants and speakers used to sit on the floor then.

others who want to run similar discussion series elsewhere in Nepal?

First, there is “demand” for such a forum as a public resource; if that was not the case, we, the organizers, might have continued to run the series but no one else would have shown up. While the attendance tends to vary a lot (anywhere from 5 to 70 people), on most occasions, more than 20 people do come to listen to the speaker(s). There is no reason to believe that such a demand exists only in the Kathmandu Valley and not in other parts of the country. Hence, it should be possible to run similar discussion series not only in the other large cities of the country but also in smaller towns and villages.

Second, the longevity of *Mangalbare* shows that even a moderate-sized group of individuals can keep a discussion series going for several decades. In the past 25 years, this series has been kept alive by a small set of relatively young individuals with energy, enthusiasm and commitment for *guff*. Hence, to run such a series in other parts of the country, you will need a small group of committed individuals willing to take turns to organize discussions. It would help if the group members like each other’s company and do not have egos that come in the way of organizing. It would also help if new member organizers joined the group when one or more of its members retire or move on to do something else.

Third, there is no dearth of topics to talk about. It would be impossible to list the topics discussed in *Mangalbare* over the past 32 years, but even recalling the themes covered during 2023 alone would be instructive. Recent discussions have continued to explore themes related to

democracy and development in Nepal. On democracy, recent presentations have focused on the possible dangers artificial intelligence might pose to democracy, on intra-party democracy and on the Madheshi struggle for recognition. Other discussions have focused on the preparations (or lack thereof) by our federal parliamentarians before they raise important issues, on the contradictions between the proportional representation principle and the results of the 2022 elections, on the stalled federal education act, on justice for survivors of trafficking and on the state of journalism in the country.

On the development front, there have been discussions on the ongoing water crisis in the Tarai and its links with the exploitation of the Chure Hills, on tourism, on the challenges of developing hydropower, on development projects among the Musahars, on the challenges of training school teachers, on the health care needs of menopausal women and on the consequences of privatization of health care. Many other topics have also been covered, such as the challenges of organizing a music archive in Kathmandu.



Discussion being held in the new seminar hall at MC Premises.

In past years, we have had many book discussions attended by authors, editors, critics and readers. Given the relatively large number of books being published by Nepali authors these days, organizing such book discussions should be easier today (in terms of the richness of choices) than in the past. Discussion series organizers based in a specific city could also come up with a long list of *local* topics that might be of special interest to the residents of that city. Once the series gets going, simple curiosity would give birth to new topics.

Fourth, finding different speakers to lead these discussions is something doable. It is not always easy,

but with some effort, speakers can be found and asked to lead discussions on themes about which they know more than most people. Their expertise might come from personal experiences or research. These people might be local residents, but they could also be visiting from other locations in the country and abroad. If the internet facilities are reliable, an occasional speaker might be asked to speak to the local discussion group via some virtual meeting platform. If the speaker is an academic, they might have to be told in advance to pitch his/her presentation to a non-specialist audience.

Finally, a physical meeting space is needed to host the discussion series. We have built a seminar hall in our office premises for this purpose, but in other cities, people can use meeting rooms of local clubs or libraries, classrooms of schools or colleges and similar rooms for this purpose. Such places do exist just about everywhere. If needed, local governments should facilitate the availability of such rooms by paying the necessary rent.

Let hundreds of *Mangalbares* bloom.

(MC researcher Pratyoush Onta participated in a *Mangalbare* discussion for the first time in January 1992. A slightly different version of this write-up was earlier published in *The Kathmandu Post* on November 10, 2023)

## THE 2023 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

This year's Chautari Annual Conference took place on November 28–30, 2023 at the organization's premises in Thapathali, Kathmandu. Over the course of three days, 45 papers were presented by various researchers, academics and other professionals from Nepal and abroad. These presentations were organized in 15 separate sessions including two specific thematic panels. The first of these thematic panels, "The Living Mountain: Intersubjective Readings," was held on the first day of the conference. The second was held on the second day under the title "Histories of School Education" in which three Martin Chautari staff researchers—Devendra Uprety, Sanjila Moktan and Rukh Gurung—presented their ongoing research on various aspects of the histories of school education in the Nepali



Panel on "Researching Menstrual Health" during the Chautari Annual Conference – 2023.

cultural world. The fourth presenter in this panel was Deepak Aryal, a Martin Chautari member who is an archivist at Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya. He spoke about "Hundred Years of Nepali *Varnamala* and the Loss of Its Diversity."

**“Chautari Annual Conference 2023: There is nothing more satisfying than finding the ideal platform to present your work.”**

**Garima Bhandari, PhD candidate, IIT Roorkee @Garimabhandary**

The first day of the conference also featured a keynote address by Dr Avidit Acharya, who is a political economist and a Professor of Political Science at Stanford University. Titled "Historical Persistence and Social Change," Professor Acharya reviewed recent writings on historical persistence which "refers to the idea that the effects of historical forces can persist long into the future." He discussed "how the persistence literature could now benefit from a reorientation that seeks to answer the main open questions in the literature: Under what conditions does historical persistence take place? And under what conditions does social change occur, leading to breaks in historical persistence?" The complete schedule of the 2023 Conference is available here: <https://martinchautari.org.np/blogs/chautari-annual-conference-2023-program-schedule>

**“It was very impressive and insightful program. Thank you so much to ... the entire Chautari family for providing such an intellectual platform.”**

**Rajan Kandel @kdlrajan**



Prof Avidit Acharya delivering his keynote address on November 28, 2023.





Panel on "Literature, Cinema and Cultural Heritage" during the Chautari Annual Conference – 2023.

More than 100 individuals registered for the conference and they participated very actively during all three days of the conference. After the conclusion of the conference, several of the participants posted appreciative posts in X (formerly known as Twitter).

Until 2019, the Chautari Annual Conference used to take place during the month of April. The Conference could not be held during 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. From 2022, it has been held later in the year. The next edition of this annual conference will be held in late November 2024. The call for papers will be made public in January 2024.

## THE CHAUTARI FOUNDATION LECTURE – 2023

The Chautari Foundation Lecture – 2023 was delivered by senior advocate Mr Radheshyam Adhikari at the MC premises on Friday, December 22, 2023. Adhikari who is also a former lawmaker and a member of both Constituent Assemblies that deliberated and promulgated the Constitution of Nepal, 2015, spoke about "Nepal's Loktantrik (Democratic) System and Constitutionalism." The lecture was attended



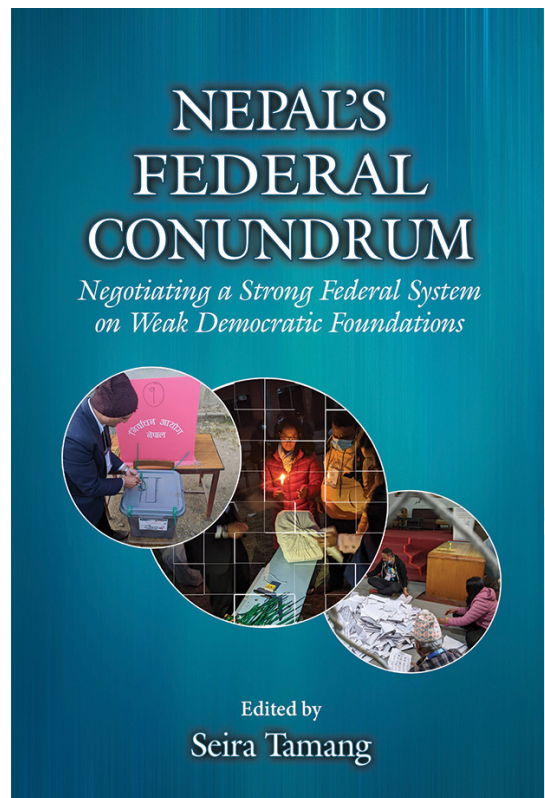
Mr Radheshyam Adhikari (left) delivers the Chautari Foundation Lecture on December 22, 2023. MC chair Kumar Pandey (right) introduced him.

by more than 100 participants. More details about the lecture, delivered in Nepali, can be found here: <https://martinchautari.org.np/events/chautari-foundation-lecture-2023>. A video of the lecture can be found at: <https://youtu.be/Bb0INr1P77E>

The Annual Chautari Foundation Lecture is an occasion both of mature reflection on Nepal's past trajectory and of stimulating debate on the future by some of the best public minds. It was founded in 2015. The lecture was not held in 2020, 2021 and 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous speakers have included energy expert Bikash Pandey (2015), senior botanist Dr Tirtha Bahadur Shrestha (2016), feminist organizer Dr Renu Adhikari (2017), writer Manjushree Thapa (2018), and civil society activist and writer Dr Devendra Raj Panday (2019). The full texts of the previous lectures have been published and can be read by clicking the appropriate links here: <https://martinchautari.org.np/event-categories/chautari-foundation-lecture>

## PUBLICATION

During the period covered by this newsletter, only one book got published, a volume edited by former chair of MC and feminist theorist, Dr Seira Tamang. Titled *Nepal's Federal Conundrum: Negotiating a Strong Federal System on Weak Democratic Foundations*, it contains eight previously published articles with a newly written extensive introduction by the editor. This volume seeks to examine how the federalization process in Nepal has been



unfolding since the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015. Historically contextualized around democratic institutions and spaces, the articles in this book focus on frameworks that have contoured institutions and processes. They also discuss the intricacies of the everyday practices with which federalized governance is being realized.

The deep analyses make clear that the post-2015 period has been one of active negotiations of authority between old and new state institutions as well as citizens and groups. The writings also reveal the manner in which new political institutions, spaces and actors at the different levels are contoured by memories and practices of previous government institutions and relations, as well as by patronage relations, conflict, communal relations, impunity and structured inequalities. The volume was conceptualized as a follow-up publication to *Reading Nepali Transition (2006–2015)* edited by MC member the sociologist Pranab Kharel and published in 2022. Details about the new book and its table of contents can be found here: <https://martinchautari.org.np/mc-publications/nepal-s-federal-conundrum-negotiating-a-strong-federal-system-on-weak-democratic-foundations>. It is available in all the major bookstores in Kathmandu.

Pre-press editing work on the next issues of *Studies in Nepali History and Society* (volume 28, no 2) and *Samaj Adhyayan* (volume 19) is ongoing.

## ODD HOFTUN CAPACITY BUILDING INITIATIVE

During the memorial for late Odd Hoftun held in Kathmandu on March 28, 2023—an event co-organized with several other organizations—MC chair Kumar Pandey announced the “Odd Hoftun Capacity Building Initiative.” Under this initiative, MC will continue to organize and host various capacity building exercises that it has also conducted in the past and launch new types of such works. The Chautari Annual Conference – 2023 reported above is one such capacity building event since it allows relatively young researchers to present their research and get feedback from conference participants. This allows them to revise their papers for further presentations and publication. The



Closing session of the Chautari Annual Conference – 2023.

three reading seminars organized earlier this year are also examples of capacity building exercises organized by MC.

As in 2023, MC is planning to organize a workshop for women researchers in March 2024. The idea of the workshop is to allow each presenter (we expect to host 4–5 presenters) about an hour to present her work and get feedback from a designated commentator and other participants. It is hoped that the paper writers will subsequently submit their revised papers for publication in the two journals edited at MC and other journals. The public call for papers to be presented at the workshop was made in early December 2023. Further details about that call can be found at: <https://martinchautari.org.np/events/call-for-abstracts-workshop-of-women-researchers-2024>

We also expect to host several reading seminars in 2024. One on “Decolonial Theory and Practice” will be offered by Dr Sanjay Sharma in spring 2024.

## UPDATE ON MC ENDOWMENT FUND RAISING CAMPAIGN

MC has thus far relied on donor funds to run its core activities. Since those funds are drying up, one of the ways we might be able to sustain the organization financially in the long run is by creating an endowment fund which can be used specifically to finance MC’s core activities. In early 2023, MC decided to launch an Endowment Fund Campaign with the objective of raising NRs. 50,000,000 (fifty million rupees) by December 2025. Since it requires the collaboration of many individuals and institutions to create such an Endowment Fund, MC has appealed to various well-wishers for contributions to this fund. Several individuals and some institutions have already contributed to this Endowment Fund.

The principal amount of the raised Endowment Fund will be kept in several fixed deposit accounts and only their interest income will be used to support MC’s activities. By the end of December 2023, we have been able to raise nearly 5.9 million rupees. This amount includes contributions from our well-wishers from within and outside of Nepal as well as MC’s own seed contribution to the fund. Out of this collected amount, 4.1 million rupees has already been deposited in a fixed account.

Further information on the Endowment Fund Campaign including the ways in which you can make a gift contribution can be obtained from: <https://martinchautari.org.np/appeal-for-contribution-to-chautari-endowment-fund>

## SELECTIVE EXCERPTS FROM TESTIMONIES THAT DESCRIBE MC’S “IMPACT”

In late 2023, we asked various friends and colleagues to write short testimonies of how MC’s work has impacted their work and lives. We also asked them to reflect on the



general importance of MC's work for Nepal's public sphere and the landscape of research and publications. Here are some excerpts from what three of them have said in their testimonies.



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### **CHAUTARI RESEARCHERS UNDERTAKE QUALITY RESEARCH**

In a Nepali village a *Chautari* is a stepped platform built around a sacred leafy tree usually a pipal (*ficus religiosa*) or bar (*ficus benghalensis*). Here people congregate, interact, discuss, argue, and mostly share ideas on issues of relevance to the community, and occasionally arrive at a decision on some vexing question. In the process knowledge is generated, nurtured and disseminated. What is sacred is the community. Martin Chautari fits this role admirably in the rather sparse intellectual setting of the crowded and often chaotic capital city of Nepal.

As an occasional visitor and participant in the activities of Martin Chautari I always come back with enough food for thought. Every time I have participated I have benefitted immensely from the discussions on topics of contemporary social, economic, political or literary relevance led by some unassuming Pandit. To my knowledge this should be the oldest and the only regular platform for intellectual discussion of this type in Kathmandu.

Martin Chautari has a well-stocked public library on humanities and the social sciences which provides a mine for enthusiastic researchers. Chautari publishes two well-regarded and peer reviewed journals—*Studies in Nepali History and Society* (SINHAS), in English, and *Samaj Adhyayan*, in Nepali, regularly every year. SINHAS has completed 27 years of uninterrupted publication, a rare feat for an internationally known journal from Nepal.

On meagre resources Chautari researchers undertake quality research on contemporary issues mostly focusing on education, the media landscape, gender issues and marginalized communities. Chautari regularly organizes academic seminars, and also workshops, mostly for young researchers to hone their research and writing skills. It also publishes books based on own research or solicited from established researchers. In Nepali intellectual landscape Martin Chautari fills a void that our universities should have filled in, but sadly do not.

#### **Pitamber Sharma**

Former Professor of Geography, Tribhuvan University  
Former Vice-Chair, National Planning Commission



### **AN INTELLECTUAL COMMUNITY FOR ALL SEEKERS**

When I come into the Martin Chautari building, I often go from room to room, from the bottom floor to the roof, saying hello to everyone. It is a friendly place. I marvel always at how

I move through this space. As much as it is a choice I make, my movements are propelled by the culture of openness which characterizes Chautari. It welcomes by design—through conversation, through simple furnishings, through invitations to eat together, through open doors and windows communicating a lack of barriers to movement.

The design of its space is representative of what Chautari offers in Kathmandu: an intellectual community for all seekers. Some 15 years ago, I was one such seeker. A young woman striving to make sense of the world around me. Eager to learn about as much as act and engage in the world through organizing, writing, reading, and conversation. The Chautari culture made it easy for me to seek out conversations there. To share what I aspired to. To ask for advice. I found friends, interlocutors, and mentors there. And I have considered myself a part of the Chautari community even since.

My engagements with and at Chautari have spanned over a decade. I have been a part of the programs they offered: reading seminars, writing workshops, discussion sessions. I have organized collaborative reading groups and discussion series through a feminist collective of which I was a member. I have written for *Studies in Nepali History and Society* (SINHAS). When I decided to apply to graduate school to study History some years ago, I turned to friends and mentors at Chautari. They opened up their networks, read applications, and offered enthusiastic congratulations when I got accepted into graduate school.

I have always felt bolstered and encouraged by my interactions at Chautari as I pursued my evolving political and intellectual commitments. I believe Chautari can continue to bolster and encourage, myself and others, for many years to come.

#### **Surabhi Pudasaini**

PhD candidate in history, University of Chicago



### **A "PEOPLE TREE"**

When I "discovered" Martin Chautari (MC) in the mid-1990s, it was a freewheeling forum of public conversations based on the ground floor of a nondescript

building at Thapathali. The organization of discussions were



completely casual. Information about the theme of the *Mangalbare*, named so because it was held on Tuesdays, was spread by the word of mouth. Interested participants gathered in the afternoon, chatted in the veranda till the predetermined time and then assembled in a room to listen to the main speaker of the day.

The format of deliberations too was simple: Everyone present introduced themselves, listened to the presenter and then shot questions or showered opinions until the closing time. On the way out, participants were free to contribute a small sum—usually 10 Rupees—to partially cover the cost of black tea and sweet cookies. It has been almost three decades, but *Mangalbare* remains the defining image of MC in my mind.

I listened to presentations about social, political and cultural issues. Some researchers talked about their work. A few experts dwelled upon vexing issues of democracy, development, civil society and international relations. In due course as a regular, I evolved from a listener to a speaker. Outside the circle of my friends and families, I made my first presentation about the travails of Madheshis in Nepal at one of the *Mangalbares*.

It was a place where civil-military relations could be discussed freely despite the presence of barely disguised operatives of intelligence agencies. It took a while, but MC was soon organizing issue-based seminars; publishing

curated anthologies, meticulous bibliographies, edited volumes, original works and a peer-reviewed journal with an international cast of editors; running training and skill enhancement sessions for academics, journalists and researchers; putting out policy papers and monographs; and conducting outreach programs in different places of the country to disseminate knowledge that it had produced.

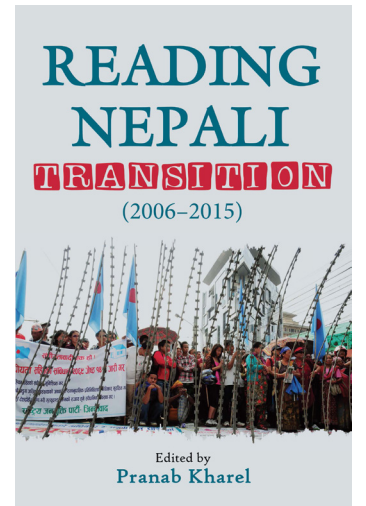
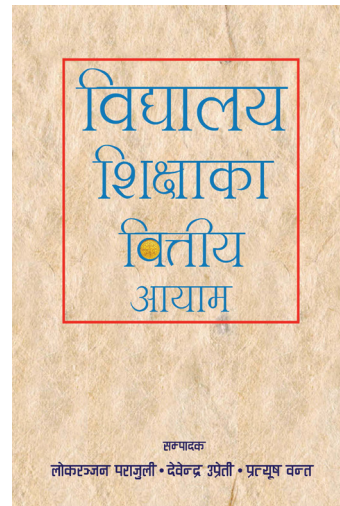
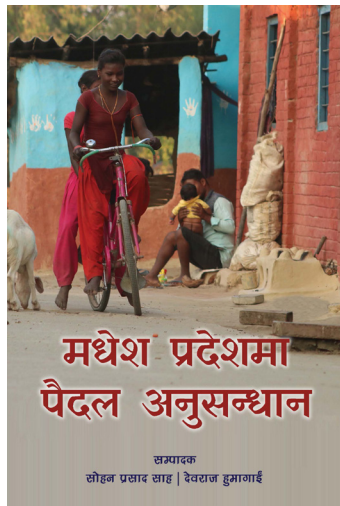
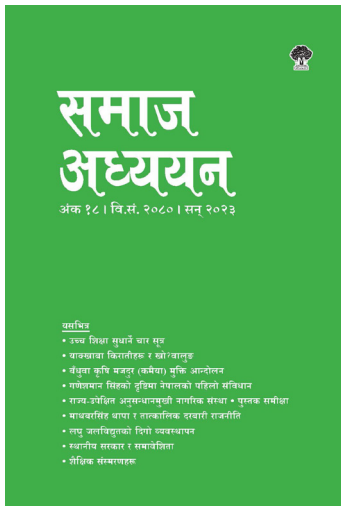
I have benefited immensely from participation in MC talks and seminars and from reading its various publications, particularly its two journals—*Studies in Nepali History and Society* and *Samaj Adhyayan*. My contribution has been rather modest: A few talks, some essays for its publications, a volume that I have called ‘think paper,’ and a few presentations during outreach programs.

These days, I often drop by at MC unannounced and have the privilege of learning from informal conversations with a group of dedicated researchers that are devoted to such an intellectual enterprise. Its library is well-stocked and boasts of some of the best works about media and society. The MC is more than a conventional think-tank; it’s a “people tree” that never sheds its leaves and offers shade to students and teachers of Nepali society with equanimity. It needs to be watered and nurtured for the good of us all.

**CK Lal**

Columnist, writer and public intellectual

## RECENT CHAUTARI PUBLICATIONS



**MARTIN CHAUTARI**

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