

CHAUTARI QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

No. 6 | July–September 2024

REGULAR DISCUSSIONS

Chautari has started a joint monthly Karnali discussion series in collaboration with Karnali Discourse Society, a group that is committed to promoting various discussions about the province. This series is coordinated by Madhav Chaulagain of the Society and meets on the second Tuesday of each month. Three discussions have already taken place since it was started in July 2024. The first was focused on the touristic, economic and social potential of mountaineering in the Karnali Province. The second discussion was focused on issues of grazing, land use and adaptation in the region.



From left: Basanta Acharya, Jagannath Adhikari and Yamuna Ghale speaking at the book discussion

The third one, held on September 10, 2024 was a book discussion focused on the second edition of *Food Crisis in Karnali: A Historical and Politico-economic Perspective* (2024) written by the former chair of Chautari, Dr Jagannath Adhikari. Basanta Acharya and Dr Yamuna Ghale commented on the book. Dr Adhikari, a human geographer who has published many books and articles, responded to their comments and those made by other participants. It should be noted that a monthly discussion series focused on the Karnali region was previously jointly organized between the years 2015 and 2019 by Chautari and Karnali 2020. Karnali 2020 is an informal initiative, formed in July 2015, of students and citizens from the Karnali region residing in Kathmandu. It serves as a platform for national advocacy of issues related to the Karnali region as a whole.

RESEARCH ON THE HISTORY OF SCHOOLS AND SCHOOLING

As reported in Newsletter No 4, Chautari has been implementing a research project “History of the Public School Education in Nepal” from April 1, 2023. This research has explored various aspects of the history of public school education in Nepal and the related history of access to schools for Nepalis in India. Given the dominance of the state-centric approach in the existing writings on the subject,

Chautari researchers have proposed a different approach to this history. First, they have focused on the agency of individuals and collectives that made school education possible for members of various groups and communities that had hitherto little access to schools. Pratyoush Onta has done research on the role of Gopal Pandey in starting the Nepal Shiksha Parishad in the early 1950s. Through the Parishad, Pandey was able to institutionalize the “Rashtrabhasa Shiksha Pranali,” a whole system of school education exclusively based on the Nepali language, for over two decades.

Devendra Uprety has focused on the work of Krishna Prasad Koirala in starting several schools in east Nepal in the early decades of the 20th century. In August, Uprety wrote a short piece on Koirala in his column for the magazine *Shikshak* (martinchautari.org.np/storage/files/krishna-prasad-koirala-ek-pragatishil-shaikshik-abhiyanta1.pdf). Consultant researcher Arjun Panthi has focused on the work of Khadananda Guru in establishing a Sanskrit Pathshala in Dingla in east Nepal in the 1890s. He presented his paper at a regular Chautari seminar on August 11.

Second, Chautari researchers are also exploring how a school or hostel in a specific location is differentially related to various social constituencies present in that locality. Such research has been carried out by Sanjila Moktan in Dapcha/Dabjong in Kavrepalanchok, about 40 kms east of Kathmandu. Moktan is researching why Tamang girls and women largely failed to enroll in Shree Krishna Secondary School although it was founded in Dabjong in 1952. A workshop was organized at the School on September 13 in which Moktan shared her previously published research on why Tamang men and women did not have access to the Bhasha Pathshala established in the area in 1929. There were about 25 participants in this workshop, some of whom shared their school experiences.



Sanjila Moktan presenting at a workshop held in Shree Krishna Secondary School, Dabjong on September 13, 2024

Rukh Gurung is researching what role Thaman Hostel in Dehradun, India played in shaping the educational experiences of children of Gurkha soldiers in the near-by Gurkha School. Gurung says that this research is important since some alumni of the Thaman Hostel and Gurkha

School “have achieved success across a range of professional sectors including the Nepal Army, Nepal Police, sports, administration, education, and academia” in Nepal.

Third, Chautari researchers have also looked at the historical discourses around school education. In particular, Lokranjan Parajuli has examined the voices that opposed co-education in Nepal during the middle decades of the 20th century. Onta, Gurung and Parajuli presented the first drafts of their papers at the Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya organized by Social Science Baha in late July. Their panel was chaired by Pramod Bhatta, a former chair of Martin Chautari.



Bhatta, Onta, Parajuli and Gurung at the Annual Kathmandu Conference, July 25, 2024 (photo credit: Nirmal Man Tuladhar)

Uporety, Parajuli, Moktan and Onta also presented their current research to about 30 participants in a workshop held in Chautari premises on September 29, 2024. Earlier, on August 8, all the researchers involved in the school history research project offered a workshop on “Education history writing methods.” Various methods used by Chautari researchers to explore educational history were shared with the participants who had signed up for the workshop.



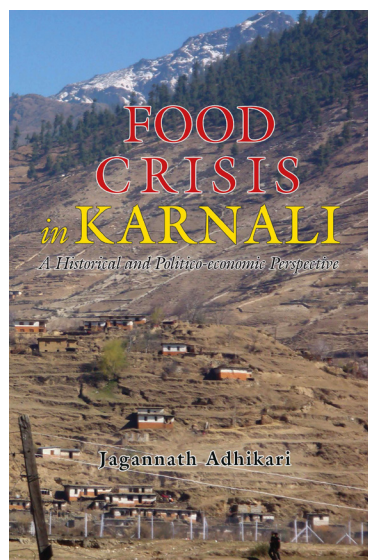
Pratyoush Onta presenting at a workshop held in Chautari on September 29, 2024

PUBLICATIONS

The first issue of volume 29 of the journal *Studies in Nepali History and Society* was published in August. Its table of contents can be found here: <https://martinchautari.org.np/mc-publications/sinhas-volume-29-number-1>

As mentioned earlier, the second edition of *Food Crisis in Karnali: A Historical and Politico-economic Perspective*

written by Dr Jagannath Adhikari was published in August. This second edition comes with a new epilogue where the author discusses changes that have taken place in the Karnali region since he did his original research for



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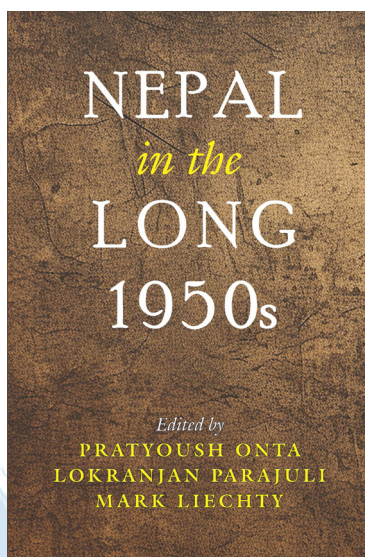
A Mandala Book Point Journal

this book in the 1990s. This includes the making of the Karnali Province in 2015 as part of the new federal set-up. The book will be useful for researchers, students, politicians, and development practitioners who are interested in Karnali. Its table of contents can be found here: <https://martinchautari.org.np/mc-publications/food-crisis-in-karnali>

Nepal in the Long 1950s, edited by Pratyoush

Onta, Lokranjan Parajuli and Mark Liechty was sent to the printer in late September. The events that took place in Nepal in the 1950s are part of a tectonic transition that had been set in motion long before, and which continued to reverberate long after the actual decade. Foreshadowed in the rise of anti-colonial movements and new forms of capitalism, the post-World War II era, from the 1940s to 1960s, saw the restructuring of global interstate relations and new forms of global capitalism.

The ten chapters in *Nepal in the Long 1950s*



aim to situate the events of that turbulent decade within larger frames both in terms of time—the complex historical processes that led to the transitions of the 1950s and continued thereafter—and space—the complex regional and global contexts in which events in Nepal took place. Together they offer new perspectives on mid-20th century Nepal and broaden the scope of historical study into more social and cultural dimensions. The book's table of contents can be found here: <https://martinchautari.org.np/mc-publications/nepal-in-the-long-1950s>

CAPACITY BUILDING INITIATIVES

READING SEMINAR ON CASTE

Chautari organized a reading seminar entitled “Unravelling New Layers of Caste: Embodiment, Affect, Emotion, and Performative” in August-September 2024. Cultural anthropologist Dr Amar BK led this seminar which ran for five weeks with one two-hour class session per week. The seminar explored new literature that delves into the emotional, affective, performative, experiential, and gender dimensions of caste, with the concept of touch being the central focus. This seminar offered deep insights on the multifaceted experiences of caste in contemporary society. It was targeted to MA, MPhil, PhD students and early career scholars. There were 13 participants in this reading seminar. More details about this seminar can be found here: <https://martinchautari.org.np/events/reading-seminar-on-unravelling-new-layers-of-caste-embodiment-affect-emotion-and-performative-with-dr-amar-bk>



Amar BK

ENERGY POLICY DIALOGUE SERIES

As part of its capacity building initiatives, Martin Chauari in collaboration with Urja Khabar media team, has started a monthly “Energy Policy Dialogue” series from April 2024. The dialogue is held on the last Tuesday of each month. Legal expert Mahesh Thapa commented on the proposed electricity bill on September 24. On August 27, energy economist Deepak Gyawali talked about the enormous potential of pumped storage hydropower in Nepal but stressed that this field was caught in legal and policy complications. On July 30, Dr Biraj Singh Thapa of Kathmandu University spoke on



the economic feasibility and related issues regarding green hydrogen development in Nepal. These discussions have been very popular and have been attended by an average of 40 persons.

NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENTS OF MC MEMBERS

Sohan Prasad Sha assumed the post of the vice-chair of the Policy and Planning Commission of the Madhesh Province on June 20, 2024. Earlier, he was the coordinator of Chautari's Barefoot Research initiative.

Earlier in the summer, Surabhi Pudasaini completed her PhD in history at the University of Chicago. The title of her dissertation is "Making and Knowing in the 19th Century Gorkhali Polity."



Sohan Prasad Sha

DISSERTATION WRITING FELLOWSHIP

by **Dipti Sherchan**, PhD candidate in Anthropology, University of Illinois at Chicago

When I landed back in Kathmandu in early January 2024 to resume my doctoral fieldwork and kickstart the preliminary dissertation writing phase, I was warmly welcomed by the team at Martin Chautari (MC) who offered me a cozy office space with a great view of the mulberry tree in their yard, unlimited access to both their library stacks and coffee/tea station, subsidized access to their delicious *khaja*, and a convivial environment to ideate and soundboard work-in-progress thoughts and challenges on writing the dissertation. Thus began my short but generative stay at MC as their *Dissertation Writing Fellow* between February–July

2024. The fellowship came as a godsend as I was looking to find a quiet space to start formulating the shape of my dissertation and yet I knew what I also needed was the ability to move between a quiet space and an engaged space (in other words, a scholarly community). So often I would find myself arriving at MC with ideas brewing in my head—what the first chapter was going to be like, whether the outline for the dissertation made much sense, and what “stuff” was missing from my fieldwork material. And as I would settle into the office, around noon, the common space on the first floor would come to life with people who wanted a little reprieve from their procrastination from working on various research and editorial projects. I would often find myself gently nudged by peers like Rukh ji, Shyam ji, Sanjila ji and Devendra ji to share my writing struggles. We would laugh, chuckle, and often nod in agreement that “*lekhna garo chha*.” After that validating hour or so of conversation, I would go back into my office space to mull over some of the recommendations I had received regarding an author or a book that I must read or strategies on making progress with writing.

As days went on, I had to divide my time between MC and carrying out my fieldwork, so I found myself moving between Khumaltar, Pimbahal, Maitighar and Kalopul. On Sundays and Tuesdays, I would find my way back into MC to attend their research seminar and discussion series which provided me with a space to think about the larger picture of research and knowledge production in Nepal (and South Asia). While the topics varied, the discussion sessions afterwards would always provoke thoughts and notes on my own research project.

As part of the fellowship, I was also encouraged to present a chapter during their *Research Seminar Series* and while I remember trying to shy away from this opportunity (out of sheer anxiety), in retrospect, I believe this to have been one of the most generative exercises to my writing process. On July 7, 2024, I presented a work-in-progress chapter on “Panchayat Cultural Politics, Nepali Modernisms, and Building a Modern Nation” and received feedback and comments that has helped me workshop some of the historical and conceptual threads of the chapter. Perhaps sensing my nerves, I had received a pleasant email from Seira Tamang and Amina Singh who invited me to a lunch before the talk—which was not part of the fellowship arrangement—but I believe it to be one of the perks that came with it. The lunch was as much a part of the writing process as was the seminar session, as was the hour-long conversation breaks, as was the run to the library to bug Buddha ji, as was chatting with Maya didi after meals, as was gingerly learning table tennis, as was nervously talking about the dissertation plan with Pratyoush ji towards the end of the fellowship period.

The dissertation writing fellowship was a glimmer—a glimpse into what a nurturing scholarly space can look like



Dipti Sherchan presenting at Chautari on July 7, 2024

for graduate students who are fighting some of the worst demons in academic spaces—alienation, anxiety, and burn out to name a few. The writing process is tenuous, tentative, and treacherous. Such a delicate process requires a dedicated space that doesn't demand high productivity but deep and empathetic engagement. The fellowship in many ways was a point of entry into such a space—it afforded me the routine and structure to fall back on and a community of peers and scholars who intimately understood the context in which my dissertation was situated. I am grateful that I visited MC early January to drop off some books for their library—which I would highly recommend any/every Nepali graduate student to do (it might just land you a fellowship!). I would like to thank the team at MC and people who showed up for the seminar series. Thank you!

ODD HOFTUN (1927–2023): AN OBITUARY

by **Suman Basnet**, Chautari member and Team Leader at the Nepal Renewable Energy Program

I first met Odd on a cool February morning in 1987 when he interviewed me for a job at the Butwal Power Company (BPC) Jyathatol office in Kathmandu. This was almost 30 years after Odd first came to Nepal in 1958. Almost 30 years after our first meeting, I met him for the last time in April of 2016 at his home in Norway. Therefore, I consider myself fortunate to have known Odd for over 30 of the 60 or so years that he lived in and for Nepal. Odd was my boss, but more importantly he was my well-wisher and mentor. It is with this background that I would like to share with you my perspectives on Odd's life and work in Nepal.

If we reflect on Odd's association with Nepal, it can be summarized by six locations:

- **Tansen** – where while building a hospital, he realized Nepal's need for the three Es: Electricity, Education and Enterprises. When I say education, I mean it in its broadest sense to include knowledge, skills and values.
- **Butwal** – where Odd combined education (think of Butwal Technical Institute or BTI), electricity (think of Tinau hydropower plant) and enterprises or industries (think of BPC, Butwal Engineering Works, Butwal Plywood Factory, Himal Hydro and Nepal Hydro and Electric or NHE) to stimulate development which has made Butwal what it is today.
- **Andhikhola, Jhimruk and Khimti** – where he worked to progressively institutionalize private sector led hydropower development in Nepal.
- **Kathmandu** where most of his negotiating and convincing took place, often traveling in his trusted bicycle.



A meal being served in the one-room staff quarter above the BPC office in Galyang, Syangja, 1991. From left: Suman Basnet, Egil Hagen (then Andhi Khola Project Manager), Odd Hoftun, and Dr Sudha Basnet (photo credit: Suman Basnet Collection)

Reflecting on what Odd's major achievements in Nepal were, I think we can summarize them into three major accomplishments. First, he successfully demonstrated the effectiveness of technical education linked closely with industries. Many BTI graduates in Nepal and all over the world being in successful positions and businesses is a living testimony to this. Second, he jumpstarted private sector involvement in all aspects of hydropower development in Nepal—BPC in generation (where I worked for 10 years), Himal Hydro in construction and NHE in hydro and electromechanical fabrication and refurbishment, to name a few companies established through Odd's initiatives.

Third, he pioneered the concept of local benefit sharing of hydropower projects, primarily through rural electrification. The first few years of my career as a young engineering graduate, took me to the villages and towns in Palpa and Syangja to provide reliable, safe and affordable electricity from Andhi Khola to households and small enterprises in local communities. Terms like cut-out devices, two-tier meters, *tayari* wiring, *bijuli dekchi*, users' organization are terms familiar to anyone who has had any involvement with BPC's rural electrification efforts in Andhi Khola.

So, what did Odd care about? Again, three points jump to my mind. First, he deeply cared about education, especially practical technical education for the youth, which not only provided knowledge, and taught skills, but also instilled attitudes and values. BTI, Hydro Lab and Kathmandu University are living examples of this. Second, he strongly believed in frugality. As Peter Svalheim has written in his book, *Power for Nepal: Odd Hoftun & the History of Hydropower Development* (English edition published by Martin Chautari in 2015), Odd strongly believed that having less money can help "trigger the imagination and bring local resources and inventiveness into play." When trying to refine the *bijuli dekchi* or *tayari* wiring designs or designing a cooling system for the very hot Andhi Khola power plant, designing a switching station in Parbat for the Tansen-Andhi Khola 33 kV line, or building a lift drinking water system for Phoksingkot in Palpa, I personally experienced this.





From left: Tullis Hoftun, Suman Basnet, Dr Sudha Basnet, and Odd Hoftun in the Hoftun house in Gjeving, Norway, 2016 (photo credit: Suman Basnet Collection)

This brings me to the third point, namely, localized technology and human resources. I know that Odd was a big believer in doing work in Nepal and through Nepali expertise. In a way, I am an example of this approach. Actions like sending Nepali technicians to Norway for dismantling equipment, refurbishment of equipment in Nepal, using simpler technologies for transmission line or tunnel construction etc. may seem to come from Odd's frugality, but equally it was a very effective way to develop and employ Nepali expertise in these areas.

So, what can we learn from Odd that will live with us? Some of my most important learnings from my association with Odd, that will live with me for as long as I am alive are that we need to love what we do, keep learning, have a vision and a long-term perspective, and that as leaders, be role models.

So, as we say goodbye to Odd as a person, we will cherish Odd as a personality. A personality defined by frugality, hard work, humility, persistence and a profound love and devotion to Nepal's development. Thank you, *tusen takk*, and *dhanyabad*, Odd, for all that you have selflessly given to us.

[Note: This is the text of the speech given on March 24, 2023 by Suman Basnet at a memorial event organized in Kathmandu by Chautari and other organizations to celebrate the life and work of Odd Hoftun]

SELECTIVE EXCERPTS FROM TESTIMONIES THAT DESCRIBE MC'S "IMPACT"

MARTIN CHAUTARI'S WORK SPEAKS TO LARGER DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Martin Chautari's work has helped shape my knowledge and skills in three main ways. First, I took part in an annual academic writing workshop in 2018 whose purpose was to help students and academics to revise a paper as a stand-alone journal article or book chapter. We were a small cohort of young researchers like myself and our mentors included

Bandana Gyawali, Pratyoush Onta, and Mahesh Raj Maharjan. They provided us with commentary on our drafts of writing each week. In addition to their comments, we were also active in providing written commentary on each other's work. Sometimes harsh and other times gentle, I found the approach of mentorship productive in two main ways. One, they provided constructive feedback to overcome the challenges of writing and rewriting, and two to write concisely and clearly to find our voice. In sum, it enabled me to write in a way that resonated with my own lived experiences and realities with an emphasis on empirical evidence. This allowed me to rethink challenges in writing by not only giving me valuable tools and mindset toward my writing but also made me appreciate the value of working in a cohort which is fundamental to any successful academic work.

Second, I got an opportunity to work closely with Pratyoush Onta who is the editor of the SINHAS journal in writing and editing book review in 2022. In my experience, this is one of the most productive works that I have done in the recent past and that I am proud of. Pratyoush ji would read my draft of the book review and send it back with comments at the end of the day in Nepal, I would typically receive it in the morning here in Canada, and then I would work on it and send it back before going to bed. The next morning I would wake up to find his email with many helpful and constructive comments to work on. My book review was finalized after three rounds of back and forth and the process entailed a lot of thinking, organizing, and developing a narrative. It was difficult for me to write but as I began to write and work on comments, I found myself becoming immersed in the process and enjoying it.

Although I had agreed to write this review in 2019, I was only able to start and finish it in 2022. In this duration of three plus years, I had given up on it many times but had always carried the book with me everywhere I went in the hope of at least starting the review. All this to say, challenges in writing are not as scary as we think it is provided that we have hands-on and encouraging mentors who can help us see through the pains of writing and find clarity and voice in writing. Of course, having finished the review, I felt more confident and reassured about my relationship with academia and writing in general. Since then even though I struggle to write clearly, I have continued to write for several platforms.

Finally, as a deterritorialized international student, I make sure to log in to Martin Chautari's Facebook/YouTube videos and listen to programs held at Chautari to catch up



Amrita Gurung, PhD student, Concordia University, Canada

on what is happening and what works are being done in Nepal and by whom. I feel connected when I do take time and listen to or watch these events on YouTube or Facebook or just read new publications. To sum up, Martin Chautari's work in terms of providing a platform and mentorship to not only aspiring but also established social scientists to come together and *guffgaaf* speaks to larger democratic values and free speech we all hold as part of a republic.

Many thanks for all the work and support.

A PLACE OF KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND DISSEMINATION FOR THE COMMON PERSON



*Dr Anup Subedee, Physician,
Kathmandu*

I have been visiting Martin Chautari since the mid-1990s. I think I had just finished high school when I first went there and attended the discussions. Soon afterwards, I went to China for medical school and I would make sure to attend a discussion there whenever I was back for holidays. The topics of discussions held there were themselves often

“controversial” or at least novel for the times, or for those of us who had just been waking up from the Panchayat era restrictions on media autonomy and discussions on public fora. However, looking back, I feel I was more drawn to that place because of the ease of access an outsider was offered to the speakers or the discussions.

The sitting arrangements were simple yet equalizing and comforting to strangers—everyone, including the speakers and the Martin Chautari moderators, sat cross-legged or with legs stretched flat on thin cushions on the floor. Anyone visiting there for the first time would not miss the simplicity and straightforwardness of the arrangements including the manner how discussions were held—which was not common at that time, or even now on most fora, in Nepal. Martin Chautari was at the forefront of a small movement spearheading open public discussions on very important topics that had previously been sidelined in the Panchayat era.

Before and during the second people's movement, Chautari was the focal location for collective civic imaginations and solidarity for the civil society that led the mass movement. Since then, over almost the last two decades, Martin Chautari has grown tremendously, and has played a crucial role in shaping the national conversations on so many areas that had long been historically necessary. However, what still impresses me the most is that this is still a people's forum for research and public conversations, unlike so many other research entities or public discussion

for a most of which are far better funded and politically buttressed compared to Martin Chautari.

Where do students in the universities of Nepal, who have been frustrated with the lack of academic explorations and research opportunities in their own universities or academic programs, go for opportunities to learn about research? Where does an average person who is interested in the past and the present and the future of Nepal feel they can go to listen to experts on various topics and learn to frame the right questions when they question the authorities? Which research organization provides better coverage for matters of vital interest to the marginalized communities? Martin Chautari is probably the only answer to this question. Do common people feel comfortable going to the other NGOs that specialize in churning out nice, glossy reports for critical questions in their mind? Do such other NGOs make their reports available in such accessible ways for the public? Unfortunately, there are not many true friends of the marginalized communities in the research circles in my opinion. Nor would an average postgraduate student at a public university in Nepal feel comfortable dropping in at any other research organization and feel welcome there. Martin Chautari is definitely a place of knowledge production and dissemination for the common man, unlike most peer entities in this country.

CHAUTARI EMBODIES A CREATIVE ACADEMIC MODEL FOR RESEARCHING THE SOCIAL SCIENCES



*James Sharrock, PhD Candidate,
The Open University, UK*

From my 18-year engagement with Martin Chautari the biggest impact of MC has been in three areas: performing a rigorous “challenge” function in debates and research on Nepal; embodying an alternative and creative academic model for researching the social sciences; and, simultaneously, generating and facilitating new and exciting research directions in the study of Nepal.

I attended my first Chautari seminar in 2006 and ever since then MC has been the main institution through which I have learnt about Nepali society, culture and politics. This learning has come in attending MC seminars and conferences; reading MC books, policy papers, and journals; using the MC library; reading newspaper op-eds written by MC-affiliated researchers; and meeting foreign and Nepali social scientists through MC-organized events. In practical terms I have quoted MC publications in every report and article that I have written on Nepal including reports for international donors and UN agencies on conflict and peace issues as well as on post-earthquake reconstruction.

But the MC impact on my work goes beyond referencing metrics. As a very junior scholar doing a master's degree in 2006 I was encouraged to write my first ever academic article with the support and advice of MC social scientists. The article was subsequently peer-reviewed and published a year later in *Studies in Nepali History and Society* journal, where I have also published another article and seven book reviews. I have presented twice at MC and received invaluable constructive and supportive feedback both times.

I also think of particular books and articles published by MC which have transformed my understanding of Nepal and influenced my own research, illustrating new directions and inspiring examples. Among many examples this includes the MC-published book *Discourses of Awareness: Development,*

Social Movements and the Practices of Freedom in Nepal (2013) by Tatsuro Fujikura, Seira Tamang's SINHAS article "Civilizing Civil Society," (2002) and Mary Des Chene's article in the same journal, "We Women Must Try to Live': The Saga of Bhauju" (1997).

Other less obvious MC impacts that have benefited me: the library is well stocked, well used, and performs a vital function for people without a large personal library; many MC books in Nepali are fun language learning tools for foreigners studying Nepali [e.g., the 2005 book *Radiosanga Hurkada: Tinpuste Nepaliko Anubhav* (Growing up with Radio: The Experience of Three Generations of Nepalis)—a set of short personal stories about the place of radio in people's lives].

MARTIN CHAUTARI PUBLICATIONS



MARTIN CHAUTARI

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