

## Editorial

### **Why *Studies in Nepali History and Society* ?**

Reflection on the state of Nepal Studies has motivated the creation of this new journal. We have noticed several divides which lessen the contribution of scholarly work published in English to our understanding of Nepali history and society. First, there is a linguistic divide. Studies in English rarely make use of the large body of scholarship written in the languages of Nepal. Second, there is a divide between description in the mode of area studies and analysis in the mode of metropolitan theory. Third, there is a divide between Nepali and foreign scholars who, with some individual exceptions, do not communicate as much as they might. In our view these various divides are related, and scholarship on Nepal would be enhanced by their elimination.

*Studies in Nepali History and Society* (SINHAS) endeavors to overcome these divides. We seek and encourage work that makes use of Nepali scholarship whenever it is relevant to the topic under study. Disciplinary journals place a premium on contributions to theoretical debates over the quality of knowledge and the detail provided about the place being theorized. We hope to show that such compromises are problematic by making SINHAS a journal where theoretical innovations are based precisely on careful and detailed study of Nepali history and society. We aim to publish work by scholars of all nationalities, and invite proposals for translations from other languages, Nepali and non-Nepali alike, that are less widely understood than English. This is a practical strategy to increase our mutual awareness of different research traditions. While we would prefer to also make Nepali the medium of common exchange, at present SINHAS will only be an English-language journal. We hope that this situation will change in the future.

As an area specialization in the international scholarly world Nepal falls within South Asian Studies. For a variety of reasons with which our readers will be familiar, "Nepal Studies" has had a marginal place within South Asian Studies. This is reflected institutionally in the sparse representation of Nepal in academic programs related to South Asia. In the broader field of South Asian Studies Nepal is commonly treated either as an extension of India, or as a somewhat peculiar variation on Indian social patterns. Such images are in part the fault of Nepali scholars, and it is our aim to promote, through publication, research that rethinks academic commonplaces about Nepali society, including its relation to the rest of South Asia.



South Asian Studies, along with other areal divisions of the world for scholarly purposes, is currently being called into question. While we agree that the Orientalist lineage of South Asian Studies deserves scrutiny, we believe that the specificity of national and regional histories may be lost sight of in the rush to analyze social phenomena in terms of "transnationalism" and "global flows". By promoting work grounded in Nepali specificities SINHAS will provide a needed reminder that even the "transnational" has its locations, and that global processes intersect with regional histories and political formations in ways that will not be predicted on the basis of theory alone. Moreover, even as scholars question the utility of the academic construct "South Asia", many new kinds of intraregional networks are developing within the political entity South Asia. If our task as social analysts includes paying close attention to the sites of our studies and not only to theoretical debates in our disciplines—as we think it must—then these other South Asian configurations deserve careful study. South Asian Studies may be more effectively reconfigured by such attention than by abstract criticism of its own past as an academic construct. Nepal, along with other smaller nations of South Asia, is actively involved in forging these new regional alliances. SINHAS will seek out work that brings these sociopolitical realignments into view.

Such an effort is in keeping with a more general mandate to ask questions about scholarly depictions of contemporary Nepal. If it is sometimes difficult for Nepalis to recognize their country in such depictions then scholars of Nepal need to think, collectively, about why that is so. Anthropological work has been regionally skewed toward the mid-hills and the mountains and toward issues emergent first from Indian colonial ethnology, and later from the concerns of anthropological theory abroad. Development studies often treat their subjects as generic "peasants", "poor", or "illiterates", to be improved according to imported criteria whose culturally specific assumptions receive little scrutiny. Work on urban Nepal often seeks out the most "traditional" forms of life, treating the rest as so much dross to be waded through in order to reach the genuine cities of old. Or if it seeks the "modern", then that is treated as a world with a predominately foreign genealogy. Nepali literature is virtually ignored in social research in English or other European languages, and thus the many connections between literature and politics form little part of the picture of Nepali politics that is presented. In Nepali history, while a few individuals like Mahesh Chandra Regmi have done monumental amounts of work to make materials available, serious



social history remains practically an untouched field of study. Such work has the potential, we believe, to alter quite radically our understanding of contemporary Nepali society.

There are indeed exceptions to this rather dismal portrait, but they are just that—exceptions. One result is an exoticization that does not aid our understanding of Nepal. SINHAS begins with the premise that anything happening in Nepal is *de facto* not exotic to it. Another result is a series of isolated portraits that do not fit well when overlaid upon one another. How to reconcile, for example, the picture of sustained sovereignty and independence that can be gleaned from one literature, with the one of abject dependence on foreign aid that can be gleaned from another? Or the picture of isolated ethnic groups little affected by inclusion in the nation-state with the arguments *janajāti* activists are now presenting for the profound cultural consequences of being part of the Nepali nation? Or, within one disciplinary context, the very different claims made about the contribution of hill farmers to deforestation, and even about the extent of deforestation in the country? Understanding and assessing the coexistence of such disparate portraits requires synoptic historical study of social research itself. Our occasional series *For a Scholarship of Nepal*, will be devoted to such work.

*Studies in Nepali History and Society* joins four other regular serial publications in English that are devoted to social research on Nepal. *The Himalayan Research Bulletin*, published in the USA, and the *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research*, published from Europe (currently in France), are primarily informational media for foreign scholars. They provide news about conferences, publications, and research in progress. While they do publish some scholarly papers, that is not their main agenda. SINHAS will, by and large, not duplicate the services already offered by those publications. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, published by the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies of Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, and the newly launched *Journal of Nepalese Studies*, published by the Royal Nepal Academy, are, like SINHAS, forums in which exchange across disciplines and across national divides can take place. We view SINHAS as a complementary publication, and thank researchers based in Nepal and elsewhere for their enthusiastic response to our journal which confirms our view that there is a need for more such publications. Finally, we express our gratitude to our publisher, Madhab L. Maharjan of Mandala Book Point, for making this journal possible and supporting it at each phase of its development, from idea to printed reality.