

Editorial

WRITING AND READING ABOUT NEPAL

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This issue marks the second year of publication for *Studies in Nepali History and Society*. In this issue we give our readers something new—two pieces in Nepali and one translation from Nepali. While in some ways it might be ideal to present all the contents of *SINHAS* in facing translation in English and Nepali, there are several reasons, besides the constraints of time and finances, that we do not want to do so. In contemporary academic writing on Nepal, language politics is a common topic of discussion and analysis. But academic writing on Nepal itself inevitably, though too often unreflectively, involves its own language politics. To write about Nepal in English is to write for a small potential audience within the country, and a potentially large one without. To write about Nepal in Nepali is to write for a potentially large audience within the country (and the Nepali diaspora), and a small potential audience among non-Nepalis. Who do social analysts write for, and why?

The joke about academics, of course, is that they write for each other while pontificating, in unintelligible theoretical language, about the world historical significance or revolutionary potential of their analyses. Like many jokes, this one may contain a large grain of truth. But let us simply consider reach. Anyone who imagines that, writing in English, they reach the bulk of Nepali academics, is probably mistaken. If we expand that category to serious Nepali social analysts, academics or not, it is definitely a mistaken assumption. And if we take seriously the concern, frequently expressed in academic circles today, for making scholarly studies relevant and accessible to those they are about, then we must recognize that writing in English about Nepal rarely addresses that concern. To make English the *lingua franca* of academic writing about Nepal is thus to shorten its reach precisely where it should be longest—among the Nepali community. Our point here is not to defend the position of Nepali as the official national language, but rather to recognize it as the most effective *lingua franca* of Nepal today. That *janajāti* language activists choose Nepali as the medium of many of their

analyses, in order to create and/or enter into a national dialogue, while many academics who write about *janajāti* language politics do so in English, points to very different sensibilities about who one writes for, and why.

Even if academics are content to write for one another, given the many mother-tongues of both Nepali and non-Nepali scholars, language politics aside, Nepali would be the most common meeting ground. That it is not the common meeting ground, but rather a large, fertile but isolated *ṭūḍikhel* (playground) where many Nepali social analysts go about their work largely unnoticed by those (Nepali and non-Nepali alike) who take English to be the natural medium of ‘international’ scholarship, or who stick to another mother tongue, suggests that many are content to write *about* but not *for* a Nepali audience.

What then of reading Nepali language scholarship? The situation ought to be somewhat better in this area which requires only passive and not active competence. And it might serve as a step to full literacy among scholars of Nepal. Yet that does not seem to be the case. Rather, the isolated *ṭūḍikhel* phenomenon is just as pronounced in the area of reading: there are those whose world of literature about Nepal is largely or exclusively in Nepali, those for whom the same is true in English, and very little passage back and forth. Quite certainly the widest footpath has been made by Nepali readers who also seek out the resources available in English, though not all who can traverse that path make use of it (yet another politics of language is at work here). The smaller *ṭūḍikhels* of other languages of scholarship on Nepal also have some footpaths to the English one and sometimes to each other, yet few to the Nepali one. But it is the English *ṭūḍikhel* that stands most aloof, enamoured of its own breadth, confident of the completeness of its design. That footpaths lead to it from other *ṭūḍikhels* only serves as confirmation—its residents rarely follow those paths to see where they might lead. And least of all do they consider following the widest path—that leading to the Nepali language *ṭūḍikhel*. We are reminded of Mark Liechty’s image of the “selective exclusion” practiced by the Ranas (this volume). But in this case what counts as ‘foreign’ is Nepali language literature about Nepal.

As we have come to the above assessment over the past few years, we have verbally urged and cajoled friends and colleagues in the English *ṭūḍikhel* to work to alter this odd situation. And we have suggested that theoretical talk about “post-colonial scholarship” issuing from the English *ṭūḍikhel* sounds a discordant note. Our remarks have, overall, not been appreciated. Beginning with this issue we make another invitation

by presenting a few things to read in a forum that reaches at least some in the English-reading world of Nepal scholarship. Sangraula's essay should make evident why, for anyone who proposes to study the *Jana Āndolan* (People's Movement), making a path to the world of Nepali writing is essential. Paudel's commentary should make clear that those who study development will do well to listen to the voices of those who grapple with its contradictions in Nepali. Not all our readers have made the study of Nepal their vocation or career. For those readers we also intend to provide some translations that will provide at least a glimpse of Nepali language worlds. We begin with a play that gives a vantage onto contemporary Nepali politics that one is not likely to find in English.

The experience of editing *SINHAS* has, however, made visible to us another more basic limitation to scholarly exchange and mutual learning. Over the past year we have received many compliments and words of encouragement for creating *SINHAS*. Many people seem to think it is an important step for Nepal studies. We hope that prediction will prove true. But it is less clear to us why so many other people already claim to believe it, for few among them appear to have actually read the contents. Though we have had some very thoughtful responses based on close reading, the bulk of comments from those who hold positions teaching about Nepal have been on the order of 'Looks great! I haven't had a chance to read it yet, but...'. Language issues aside, this raises the question: what is the place of reading in scholarship?

One of us (Onta) recently published an article under the title *Who has read Bhanubhakta?* It challenged the myth central to Bhanubhakta's status as a Nepali nationalist icon, namely that the rapid spread of his translation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* made the Nepali language a unifying force among the disparate populations of the country. Stepping back from the hagiographic tradition, Onta posed a series of difficult historical questions for which few answers are known: how many copies of Bhanubhakta's *Rāmāyaṇa* were printed? who bought them? among those who bought them who actually read them? how did a written text have such a unifying effect in a period when most were illiterate? what, in short, were the conditions of its distribution and reception? And if very few actually read Bhanubhakta's *Rāmāyaṇa* in early 20th century Nepal, is it rather the *mythology* of Bhanubhakta and his *Rāmāyaṇa* that has been a unifying force, not for everyone, but for the small group of nationalist intellectuals who sought to make their cultural traditions into Nepali national traditions?

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Academics have their myths too. Among them is “keeping up with the literature”. This too often amounts to having the latest books on one’s shelf, or knowing that they exist, and inserting mercenary citations to them in one’s own articles for their display value. Our publisher will be happy if people simply buy *SINHAS*. We will only count it a success when Nepal researchers engage with its contents in a serious way, for the whole point of this journal is to make us all think about the object — the analyzed “Nepal”—that we collectively create. Are we in much the same position as Bhanubhakta’s celebrants, or does the Nepal of academic discourses bear a closer relation to Nepali realities?

Our point is not the importance of the contents of *SINHAS*—that is for readers to decide. Our point is the importance of reading to scholarship—across languages, across disciplines, beyond narrow topical foci. In short, across *ṭūḍikhels*. As Govinda Bhatta pointed out over a decade ago in his justly famous essay, *Nepāllāi Bujhne Samasyā: Ek Lāmo ra Kaḥin Prakriyā*, trying to make sense of Nepal is a long and difficult process.