

Book Reviews

Tanka Bahadur Subba, A.C. Sinha, G.S. Nepal and D.R. Nepal, eds. 2009.
Indian Nepalis: Issues and Perspectives. New Delhi: Concept Publishing.

Indian Nepalis: Issues and Perspectives, a collection of conference papers edited by Tanka Bahadur Subba, A.C. Sinha, G.S. Nepal and D.R. Nepal marks the articulation of a definitive interest and position on the subject of Indian Nepalis in the 21st century. The editors inform the readers about the origin of the book in a conference held in Gangtok, Sikkim on Indian Nepalis in 2006 that in turn went back to another seminar held in the North-Eastern Hill University of Shillong in the 1990s. The twenty four conference papers in this volume along with an introductory and a concluding chapter are thematically divided into five sections.

The first section ‘Conceptual and Theoretical Issues’ includes four papers and begins with an Introduction to the volume by A.C. Sinha. He states that the purpose of the book is to “fill up a vital gap in the literature of the INOs” (p. 18) and describes the problem of ethnic and national identity of “Nepamul Bharatiya” or “Indians of Nepalese Origin” (INOs) in the Northeast.

In his paper titled ‘Where is Home for an Indian Nepali Writer?’ Michael Hutt writes about how the term Nepali is essential to the migrant Nepali subject outside of Nepal. A writer writing in Nepali language becomes a figure who is able to articulate by virtue of the politics of language and readership, the inarticulate and complex history of migration. The paper contextualizes the historical event of early migration through a study of displaced subjects in the margins of society in Nepali fiction from India. Ironically, it is the common experience of *duḥkha* or sorrow that characterizes the ‘old’ life left behind and the ‘new’ one in which they are trying to settle down.

Using categories from philosophy, Pravesh Jung Golay’s paper sees identity crisis as arising from man’s fundamental need to make sense of himself. Golay understands Nepali as an ethnic identity which fails to locate itself in the available historical and cultural discourse. According to his analysis, the “comprehensive and discrete research in historical and cultural arenas of the Nepali people needs to be supported [...] with facts that would replace the ‘once upon a time’ with dates and figures” (p. 59). According

to him, inclusion of Nepali history in educational curricula would enable a healthy location of class for the Nepali subject.

Goutam Biswas' paper takes the idea of philosophy of communications and uses it to understand relations across communities and their experiences. He gives the example of translation as the process which allows access, close to inhabiting the subjectivity of the other, even if it belongs to an opposing culture. The process of translation of Nepali literature into Bengali, Assamese and other languages is a method of materializing this philosophy of communications.

Bidhan Golay tries to theorize Gorkha identity in his paper at the wake of growing critical engagements with the modern nation state and formation of smaller identities. Talking about the twin aspects of tea industry and the armed forces particular to the Gorkha population in Darjeeling, Golay sees the emergent historical, cultural and literary discourses to be complementing one another in the formation of a Gorkha identity. The paper principally takes on the colonial history attached to the martial history of the Gorkhas in the creation of a subjectivity that finds representation in Nepali fiction and poetry in post-Independence India.

Tapasya Thapa interestingly begins her paper 'Being and Belonging: A Study of the Indian Nepalis' with the paradox of sameness and difference that the term 'identity' denotes. A step by step method of laying down ideas allows her to talk about Indian Nepali identity differently but whether more effectively than others, is to be saved for our later thoughts. In the post modern ways of life, it is the space and time in the rhythms of everyday life that deepens the meaning (or meaninglessness) of associations and creation of identities for migrant experience. Thapa brings out this fact in parts through the critical framework of continental philosophers and cultural thinkers and the *rasa* theory in 'reading' the evocative aspects of Indra Bahadur Rai's short story, '*Hāmi Jastai Maināki Āmā.*'

The second section in this collection consists of five papers under the head of 'Search for Indian National Identity.' Rhoderick Chalmers' paper critically examines the tensions within the Nepali public sphere in Darjeeling in the early decades of the 20th century, principally through the implementation of Nepali education, literary activities and the creation of a social class based on a form of cultural capital. While these decades laid down the foundations of a Nepali identity through Nepali language and literature, they also witnessed the carving out of a class of cultural elite at large. Chalmers tries

to show how existent social configurations of identity such as birth undergo change through processes of institutionalization, education and print with implications on the identity of the nascent community of Indian Nepalis in the Darjeeling Hills.

Offering a critique of the nation state, Rajendra P. Dhakal's paper titled 'The Urge to Belong: An Identity in Waiting' examines the state of marginalization of the Nepalis/Gorkhalis and their call for identity in British India and after. The paper uses the category of 'sub-nationalism' and ethnic identity of Gorkhas as it figured in popular political debates through the 20th century. Recognizing the extensive political and cultural discourse around questions of identity within the community, Ranju R. Dhamala's paper dwells upon questions of self perception and perception by 'other' communities in the context of the north eastern states of India. The problem of popular perception and treatment of Indian Nepalis as 'foreigners' in India continues to lie at the heart of the next paper titled 'Nepalis in India: A Neglected Discourse' by Vimal Khawas. Shrawan Acharya looks at the possible ways of dealing with identity issues in view of the fissiparous tendencies of the caste and tribal identities of Nepalis in Darjeeling and Sikkim. Through public policies and espousing of a 'positive approach' against the fissiparous view of what he calls 'Nepali sub-cultures' (referring to the castes and tribes constituting the Nepali *jāti*), Acharya emphasizes the idea of cultural planning and institutionalizing while recognizing the limitations of such practices in Darjeeling.

The third section includes six papers under the rubric of 'Regional Identities of Indian Nepalis.' Teknarayan Upadhyaya's paper describes the historical fiction written from and about the Nepalis in Northeast India. The paper shifts the location from the hitherto discussed regions of Darjeeling and Sikkim to the northeastern states of India as it traces out its geographical and cultural ties with Nepal. The paper gives a brief literary survey ranging from novels, biographies and historical narratives written in Nepali. The summaries of the novels and stories by writers like Sant Kumar Dewan, Arjun Niroula, Chandreshwar Dube and Loknath Upadhyaya 'Chapagai' help abet a reader's appetite.

K.L. Pradhan's paper gives an account of the Gorkhas settled in Mizoram and shows how the identity of Gorkhalis continues to be questioned in spite of them having adapted themselves to issues of caste and religion in the tribal society of Mizoram over the century. In a similar vein, Amena Passah's paper on Nepalis settled in the hills of Meghalaya and Assam looks at the

diasporic situation which has come to characterize the relation of Nepalis with the pre existing tribal populations in the region.

Nira Devi presents a comparative study of the Assamese and Nepali population in the Gangmouthan Gaon Panchayat, one of the early Nepali settlements in the plains of Assam. Her findings reinforce the fact that despite the high adaptability of Nepalis to Assamese language and culture the odds of being a settling population determine the progress of Nepalis there. In the next paper Tejimala Gurung critiques the ethnographic principle of racial profiling used by the various stakeholders for recruitment of Nepali laborers in the coal mines in Assam in early 19th century. The paper highlights the significance of Nepali migrants in the Nepal-Assam labor circuit and its implications on the recruitment of Gorkha soldiers in the Assam regiments.

The fourth section, ‘Nepali Sub-cultures: Youth, Women, Food and Medicine’ includes four papers on seemingly disparate subjects. Based on her field work, Anuradha Sharma works out cogent arguments on issues facing the 21st century Nepali youth in India. Her study reveals attitudes and ideas floating among the generation after the eighties in particular and contextualizes them within the social and economic conditions and above all with the question of identity. Trafficking of women into sex trade is the grim reality of intersecting borderlands of Nepal, India and Bangladesh. In her paper, Sharda Chhetri shares her findings from the study conducted on women trafficking in Mumbai and Kolkata in 2004–2005 under the funding of a Swiss foundation. Talking about ‘Food and Identity,’ Jyoti Prakash Tamang looks at the social and ritual significance of different kinds of Nepali food in his paper. His study lends itself to several disciplines of enquiry with implications on the articulation of Nepali ethnic identities in Sikkim and Darjeeling such as the creation of cultural stereotypes connected with alcohol drinking and meat eating communities.

The last section on ‘India-Nepal Linkage: History, Literature and People’ consists of four papers and a concluding chapter. In ‘Origin and Development of Nepali Language,’ Madhav Pokharel outlines the historical trajectory of the Khasa people and their encounter with the Indo-Aryan group of people. The references provide useful readings for introduction to the subject. In his paper B.C. Upreti brings out the nuances of the India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship of 1950 which according to him is wrongly seen as an obstacle in “obtaining complete nationhood of the mother country for both Indians in Nepal and Nepalis in India” (p. 348).

The question of illegal migration becomes important in a comparative study of Nepalis and Bangladeshis in the Northeast by D.B. Chhetry. The paper advocates for the idea of self advancement of Nepalis in the field of education, politics and economy to tide over inequalities arising from influx of other migrant groups. The last paper in the collection by A.C. Sinha called ‘Shared Destiny: Indians of Nepalese Origin (INO) and Nepalese of Indian Origin (NIO)’ is critical of the silence of transnational bodies such as the SAARC on the pressing problems of ethnic minorities. He moots for the category of Indians of Nepalese Origin or the ‘Nepamul Bharatiya’ and Nepalese of Indian Origin or Madhesi for people belonging to the contiguous areas of India and Nepal. However, as Tanka Bahadur Subba later states, the category of INO found no takers among the editors of the volume.

In his concluding chapter to the volume, ‘The Last Word So Far...’ Subba makes some observations about the proceedings of the conference itself and connects it to larger points at hand. While he makes us aware of the different situations that exist among Nepalis in Darjeeling, Sikkim and the Northeast, he also speaks of the tensions lying within the idea of Nepali identity. He found that the most of the speakers seemed to deny any such fault lines along the caste and tribal issues. Grappling with the problem of nomenclature he returns to language when he proposes a new term “Sakhaa Bhasa” (p. 393) for the Nepali spoken in India.

On the whole the book encapsulates a broad range of issues on Indian Nepalis. It serves as a clearing house of issues and problems which make it possible for thinkers to assess and pave the way forward which is why perhaps most of the papers take on a prescriptive tone akin to recommendations for policy making. Nomenclature emerges as a key factor in conceptualizing identity. Almost every paper uses its own nomenclature or formulation to talk about the identity in question. Hence the title ‘Indian Nepalis’ turns out to be one of the many nomenclatures that this book opens up for discussion. The papers also highlight the tension between specific issues of livelihood, alienation, and violence in everyday life and the abstract notions of identity in different locations. In view of the isolated nature of functional, disciplinary or ideological attempts at theorizing Nepali/Gorkhali identity in the past few decades, *Indian Nepalis* underlines the need to focus on the heterogeneity of Indians of Nepali origin.

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