

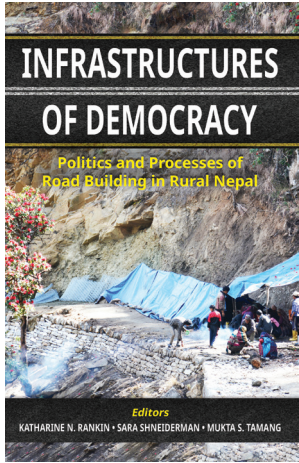


CHAUTARI QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

No. 13 | April-June 2026

DISCUSSIONS AND OTHER EVENTS

Altogether, 26 discussions were held from April 1 to June 30, 2026. A discussion focused on the *Infrastructures of Democracy: Politics and Processes of Road Building in Rural Nepal* was held on June 7, under the Research Seminar Series. The book, edited by Katharine N. Rankin, Sara Shneiderman, and Mukta S. Tamang, was published by Martin Chautari earlier in the year. Apart from the introduction and conclusion chapters by the editors, it contains three long chapters written by Nepali scholars—Lagan Rai, Shyam Kunwar, and Pushpa Hamal & Tulasi Sharan Sigdel—on the politics and practices of road building in Nepal. The book also has an afterword written by Elsie Lewison. The discussion was moderated by one of the editors, Mukta Singh Tamang. In the program, Sabin Ninglekhu, Jeevan Baniya, and Bandana Gyawali, a MC member, commented on the contents of the book. Researchers who contributed to the book, Tulasi Sharan Sigdel, Samjhana Nepali, and



Katharine N. Rankin responded to the questions and concerns raised by the discussants and other participants.



Mukta Singh Tamang moderated the program; Sabin Ninglekhu, Jeevan Baniya, and Bandana Gyawali commented on the book on June 7, 2026.

On May 24, a conversation on “Histories of Modern South Asia” was held between Gaurav C. Garg and Pratyoush Onta. Garg is a specialist on the modern history of India and Onta works on 20th century Nepal. The conversation





Gaurav C. Garg and Pratyoush Onta having a conversation on May 24, 2026.

focused on changing patterns of history writing about South Asia in the past 70 years, the emergence of Subaltern Studies, the shift to global history, and shifts in the historiography of Nepal.

In this quarter, two American scholars from the University of Hawaii at Mānoa presented their research. On May 28, Jan Brunson, Associate Professor of Anthropology, presented a seminar titled “Vertical Solutions? The Politics of Air Ambulances and Maternal Survival in Nepal.” Through her review of maternal mortality trends and ethnographic fieldwork with doctors in Kathmandu and Kavrepalanchok, she explored the development of emergency medical transport. Her research specifically analyzes the conflicting interpretations, benefits, and drawbacks of using helicopter emergency medical services (HEMS) to target vulnerable populations in health interventions. This seminar was moderated by Dharendra Nalbo from The Open Institute for Social Science and organized in collaboration with the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies-Kathmandu Center (ANHS-KC).



Jan Brunson speaking on May 28, 2026.

On June 2, Anna Stirr, Associate Professor of Asian Studies, presented on “How to Document Dance,”

highlighting her team’s work translating Subi Shah’s six books into English. Their project, *Music and Dances of Central Nepal: The Works of Subi Shah* (Open Book Publishers, 2026), compiles Shah’s music and dance notations alongside audio and video recordings. The presentation specifically focused on an unpublished manuscript featured in Volume II, *Basic Theory of Folk Dance*, where Shah experimented with different ways to document performance. Shah (1929–2008) was a traditionally trained Nepali performer and self-taught scholar dedicated to preserving the music and dance traditions of his home area of Jyamrung, Dhading, in central Nepal.



Anna Stirr speaking on June 2, 2026.

After running for almost two years, the Karnali Discourse Series has been discontinued from June 2026 upon the request of the co-organizer, Karnali Discourse Society, a group committed to promoting various discussions about the province. Former minister Madhav Prasad Chaulagain—who initiated Karnali Discourse—was invited to speak on the last episode of this series. On May 12, he talked about “Looking at Karnali from Singhadurbar: Government’s Policies, Plans, and Priorities.” This discussion was held as a conversation between Chaulagain and MC senior researcher Devraj Humagain. The Karnali Discourse series was held on the second Tuesday of each month, and served as a platform for national advocacy of issues related to the Karnali Province as a whole. That slot has been dedicated to the Tech & Society Discussion Series from June 2026. This series is jointly organized with Body & Data, an organization that works to enhance understanding and access to information on digital rights among women, queer people and marginalized groups.

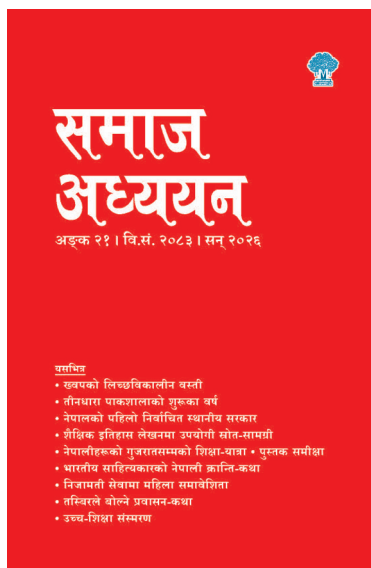




Madhav Prasad Chaulagain and Devraj Humagain having a conversation on May 12, 2026.

PUBLICATION

Samaj Adhyayan is an annual Nepali language journal published by Martin Chautari in Kathmandu. We are happy to announce that the most recent issue, No. 21 (2026), became available in print in early June. This 309–page issue contains six articles, a memoir essay, a notes from the archive (NFTA), three book reviews, a reprint of a translated short story originally written in Bangla, and an author-index to everything that has been published in this journal, numbers 11–21.



The focus of the six articles: the first municipal elections held in Kathmandu in 1947 (Lokranjan Parajuli); the impact of quotas for women in Nepal’s civil service (Samjhana Wagle Bhattarai); students from central west Nepal who went to western India for Sanskrit education in mid-20th century (Arjun Panthi); the early history of Teendhara Pakshala (Nirajan Kafle and Rajan

Khatiwoda); the visual anthropology of migration histories of Nepali women (Sanjay Sharma); and the early history of settlement in Bhaktapur (Srijana Prajapati).

Scholar of Nepali literature at Tribhuvan University, Bindu Sharma, has written a memoir essay on her efforts to acquire higher education. The education research team of Martin Chautari has put together a 30-page long NFTA on

Nepali sources useful for the writing of histories of school education. The Bangla story, “Antarjatik” was written by Satinath Bhaduri and translated into Nepali by Surya Bikram Gyawali. It was originally published in *Yugvani* in the late 1940s. The story deals with the first labor strike in Biratnagar in 1947 and the subsequent *satyagraha*.

Further details about the table of contents of this issue of *Samaj Adhyayan* and the full-texts of the three book reviews it contains can be found at: <https://martinchautari.org.np/mc-publications/samaj-adhyayan-21>

CAPACITY BUILDING INITIATIVE

Workshop on “Doctoral Studies in the Humanities and the Interpretative Social Sciences” by Gaurav C. Garg

During this quarter, Martin Chautari organized a workshop on “Doctoral Studies in the Humanities and the Interpretative Social Sciences” with Gaurav C. Garg. Garg is an Assistant Professor of History at Ashoka University, India, and a historian of cities, business, mountaineering, and development in modern South Asia.

The workshop focused on (i) how to apply for PhD programs in the humanities and the interpretative social sciences; (ii) how to write a grant and research proposal; and (iii) how to do dissertation research and writing. The 2.5-hour workshop was free and more than 40 students and researchers participated in it.



Gaurav C. Garg giving a presentation at the workshop on May 17, 2026.

Protecting the Difficulty of Arriving at a Thought Worth Having

I interned at Martin Chautari last summer, freshly arrived from my first year of college, still carrying the residue of my first real encounter with interdisciplinary thought. I had



taken a history course with Professor Gaurav Garg that traced the global history of mountains and mountaineering, how peaks became sublime in the European imagination through the Romantics, how Wordsworth's Alps seeped into a way of seeing that the rest of the world inherited without choosing. The course moved through the world wars, through the Protestant Reformation, never quite in order, and yet a chronology assembled itself in me anyway, unfolding instants into decades, from which I learned that my own appetite for mountains had a history, that I was a subject produced by a particular time rather than a pair of eyes simply looking.



Anusha Dhakal
Student, Ashoka University, India

I began to understand history as what Walter Benjamin called a constellation, as fragments arranged, rearranged, always under threat of collapsing into someone else's order. I arrived at Chautari already in love with the humanities, and already uneasy with how little of my own history I actually knew beyond the thin outline school had given me. I came wanting to study the native view of the mountains, to ask how I, as a subject formed within a particular history, had been taught to see what was supposedly mine. I wanted to study the ethics of climbing Everest and the treatment of Sherpas, carrying with me an instinctive, not yet fully theorised suspicion of colonialism.

At Chautari, I worked through a reading list compiled by Pratyoush Onta, dating from his time at Trinity College, alongside Chautari's own volume on Nepal after the 1950s. History had always resisted forming a coherent picture in my mind; certain places felt perpetually "behind," stuck in someone else's idea of an earlier century, and it was only gradually, sentence by sentence, talk by talk, that I recognized this as Edward Said's old diagnosis of orientalism playing out in my own head.

Chautari encourages a kind of thinking I have not found elsewhere in Nepal's public spaces, one that turns over the familiar until it discloses something unfamiliar beneath it. In the texts I was recommended to read, and in the weekly talk sessions, I met ideas I had never expected to care about, and I knew the learning mattered because it left me both full and unfinished at once; I felt every day, a summation and an opening simultaneously in how I was thinking. To critique, I came to feel, is to differentiate, and the institution's trinity of reading, writing, and speaking, which I lived out weekly, taught me this by sheer repetition.

Many anxieties are circling Nepal now, and Chautari has given me a way of holding them that refuses the easy poles, the fantasy of a technological-developmental-capitalist future, the equally seductive fantasy of a quaint, intellectual

past untouched by the former. A young person's life carries enough upheaval on its own that an identity crisis hardly needs inviting in. But Chautari has remained a place I can return to, to sit among elders, more seasoned researchers, and let them correct my assumptions, and to know Nepal in the slow, grating register that real scholarship demands rather than the quick certainties our current debates prefer.

What I have learned, in this brief stretch of my academic life, is how hard it is to arrive at a thought worth having, and Chautari's culture is built entirely around protecting that difficulty; the space insists on the slowness of worthwhile thinking. This is a space that has taught me to think critically, a public space I would urge anyone to enter, because the Nepal being built now needs critical thinkers, and needs spaces that keep its histories within reach rather than letting them recede. In Pratyoush Onta's words, Chautari has taught me, above all, to deny ambivalence toward my own history—toward every fanciful idea I have carried about it—and to take up instead the strenuous labor of learning, for its own sake, which I have come to think is among the most important kinds of spaces a country can offer its young.

Urja Policy Dialogue Series

Urja Policy Dialogue is a regular monthly discussion series jointly organized by Urja Khabar and Martin Chautari. Three discussions were held under this series during this quarter.



Jeevan K. Basnet speaking on April 19, 2026.

On April 28, 2026, Shreeram Neupane, Member of Parliament and the Chair of Urja Department of Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) spoke about "New Direction of Energy Development: Water Resources and Human Resources". Similarly, on May 26, Energy Economist and Emeritus Professor of Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) Ram Manohar Shrestha gave a presentation on "Uncertainty of Energy Markets and Nepal's Energy Security". Govinda Raj Pokharel, Former Vice-president of National Planning

Commission, spoke on “The Political Economy of the Electricity Sector” on June 30. Energy experts Prabal Adhikari and Kumar Pandey shared their views as commentators.

Besides the regular monthly dialogues, an additional discussion titled “Tariff-based Competitive Bidding (TBCB) Framework for Development of Transmission Infrastructure & Opportunities for Private Sector” was also held on April 19. Jeevan K. Basnet, Energy & Infrastructure Financing Professional, gave his presentation on the given topic. All these discussions were well attended by practitioners and other stakeholders of the energy sector.

TESTIMONY

Agent That Quietly Redefined the Intellectual Landscape of Nepal



Seika Sato
Professor, Teikyo University,
Tokyo, Japan

Reflecting on my 30-year academic journey alongside Martin Chautari (MC), I see it has been more than just a research hub for me; it has been the catalyst for my own scholarly evolution as well as the agent that quietly redefined the intellectual landscape of Nepal. Over the last three decades, the institution has definitely

remained a place where rigorous

scholarship meets an unwavering commitment to understanding Nepali society in all its complexity.

My first encounter with MC came through its flagship journal, *SINHAS—Studies in Nepali History and Society*. At the time, the Nepali academic landscape often felt polarized between traditional, descriptive accounts and externally-driven development reports. *SINHAS* struck me as a “new breed” entirely. The journal was not merely filling a gap; it was creating a new standard, demonstrating what serious, committed academic inquiry about Nepal could look like. I remember the distinct feeling that a new intellectual space was being carved out, one that commits to understand Nepali society with a level of critical depth that had been previously scarce.

What began as a regular readership of *SINHAS* soon evolved into a much more intimate engagement. During my research trips to Nepal, MC became my intellectual home. I found myself drawn to their frequent seminars and workshops—spaces where the air was thick with debate and the exchange of ideas was remarkably democratic. I transitioned from a silent reader in the back of the room to an active participant. I began talking on panels, delivering lectures, and submitting my own articles to *SINHAS*. The rigors of their peer-review process further cemented my respect for their standards. Later, I have had the privilege of

serving as a member of the journal’s editorial team. It allowed me to see the “engine room” of scholarship on Nepal, where meticulous attention to details and an unwavering commitment to intellectual honesty were the daily bread.

MC have had a significant impact on my professional life on another front: it helped me redraw the map of my own research. Like many anthropologists and scholars of my generation, my early work was a “typical” field study—deeply immersive but largely confined to a small, specific ethnic community in a rural setting. While valuable, this micro-focus had its limitations. Engagement with MC over the years helped me to embark on a new front of exploration: the vibrant, chaotic urbanity of Kathmandu and its surroundings. MC served as one of the conduits to facets of Nepali society that I had not previously been exposed to. Through their network, I engaged with urban working-class families and middle-class intellectuals from a dizzying array of ethnic backgrounds, which enriched my view of Nepal as a dynamic tapestry of class, ethnic, and gender differences that intersect with each other.

While MC enlarged and enriched my view of Nepal, the institution itself always remained something “extraordinary” in Nepal in my eyes. In a social environment where institutional bureaucracy can be stifling and “Nepali time” makes a routine excuse, MC stood out as a marvelous anomaly. They were, and remain, intellectually dedicated, institutionally reliable, organizationally efficient, and—most remarkably—always punctual, as amply testified by their regular and productive seminars and publications. MC people revised my conception of how people could function, even as a part and parcel of the Nepali social environment prevalent so far. They proved that productivity and critical excellence could be the trait indigenous to Nepali soil that could be cultivated through shared vision and discipline.

No doubt MC has contributed more than any other single institution to documenting and analyzing Nepali society and history during its last three decades that saw Nepal navigate political upheavals, social change, and ongoing challenges over identity, development, and democracy. They have captured the nuances of the transition from monarchy to republic, the complexities of the civil war, and the ongoing struggles for social justice. However, MC’s role goes beyond documentation. They have been an agent for transformation itself, not necessarily of Nepali society at large in any direct sense, but certainly of the intellectual and academic landscape within it. They created a space where the “subaltern” could speak and where young researchers were mentored as well as helped raise the bar for what scholarly engagement with Nepal can and should look like.

At this moment, as the country apparently is poised for further transitions—grappling with a myriad of political, social, economic issues—I believe the institution will go on to play this vital role into the future. They are the keepers of the collective memory and the sharpeners of the



intellectual tools that the next generation of thinkers will need. In this context, I feel it is not merely appropriate, but genuinely obligatory, for all those who have engaged with and benefitted from MC's work—as I have so substantially—to do whatever they can to support the institution going forward. Whether through continued scholarly collaboration, through contributing to its publications, through participating in its events, or through any other forms of engagement, those of us who have been part of the MC community carry a responsibility to help ensure this extraordinary institution continue to fulfill its role. My journey with MC that began with a single copy of *SINHAS* continues, and I look forward to seeing how MC will continue to shape the “new breed” of scholars for decades to come.



Avash Bhandari

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS OF MC MEMBERS

Avash Bhandari successfully defended his history PhD dissertation entitled “Nature Between Two Rajas: An Environmental History of Terai, 1860–1945” at the University of Illinois Chicago in May 2026.

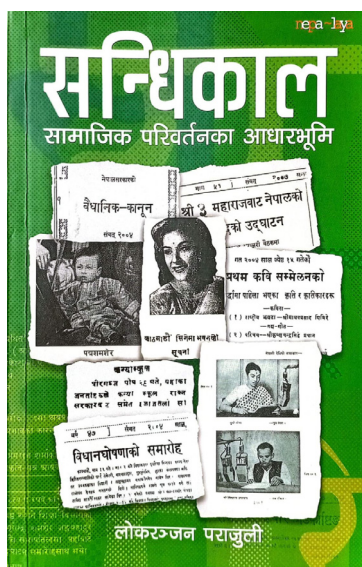
Here is the abstract of Avash's dissertation in his own words: “This dissertation asks how and why the Nepali state's approach towards forests and resources on its southern border slowly changed in the context of ascendant imperial rule in India and the Gorkha/Rana rule in Nepal in the 19th and early 20th centuries. I turn attention to the often-neglected environmental dimensions and consequences of Nepal's diplomatic relations with British India, showing how the extraction of Nepal's rich resources from its southern Terai lowlands formed the basis of the diplomacy between the two states. While maintaining control over the forests of the Terai plains, Nepali elites also selectively granted British interests access to these resources for extraction. This was an important strategy of the Nepali rulers in maintaining Nepali sovereignty and Rana rule. While keeping diplomatic questions in the background, I investigate the impacts of changes, such as large-scale timber production, on state practices on the ground, local inhabitants, and animals living in Nepal's southern frontier. By focusing on forests and the people and animals who lived in or near them, I offer a much-needed environmental-social history of non-colonized Nepal's complex ties to British India. I also pay attention to rivers as a force of nature that constantly frustrated Nepal's and British India's attempts to fix boundaries and space. Additionally, I make a case for rethinking imperialism and colonial relationships by foregrounding the colonialist approach and experience of Nepal—a formally independent political entity—which itself was within the larger imperial space of British-controlled South Asia. The Nepal Terai was subject to

multiple imperialist interests and scales of exploitation and extraction, both from the Nepali state and British India. I therefore argue that complex, overlapping projects of imperialism have shaped the ecologies and resources of the Nepal Terai and conceptualize the Terai as a space between two Rajas with their own economic and political interests. While states try to tame nature, I also show in my dissertation how nature, too, is agentic, with impacts on states, state sovereignty, and inter-state relationships, highlighting how ecologies and resources of the Terai have shaped the destinies and overlapping imperial projects of both the Rana and British rule in northern South Asia.”

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Sandhikal: Samajik Parivartanka Adharbhumi (Sandhikal: Foundations of Social Change), authored by Lokranjan Parajuli, was published by a leading Kathmandu-based publisher, Publication Nepa~laya, in April 2026. This is the first single-authored book by Parajuli who is a senior researcher at Chautari and the director of its publication program. The revolution of *sat sal* (namely, 2007 v.s. = 1951) is the biggest turning point in the history of modern Nepal. People, previously considered mere subjects, were

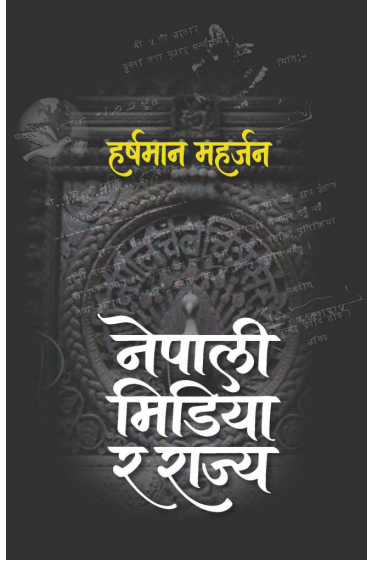
recognized as sovereign citizens after the revolution. The rights of citizens over land, which was the primary source of their livelihood, was established. When the constitution guaranteed citizens the rights to speak, read, write, print, organize, and run projects or businesses they deemed fit, it brought about a massive shift at the grassroots level. Likewise, there was a massive growth



in the number of social organizations, media institutions, schools, colleges, and libraries. *Sandhikal* uncovers the social foundations of the changes that occurred across five distinct sectors of Nepali society: politics, society, education, radio, and cinema.

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The book, *Nepali Media ra Rajya* (Nepali Media and the State) authored by Harsha Man Maharjan was published by a Kathmandu-based publisher, Phoenix Books, in May 2026. It examines the relationship between the state and the media in Nepal from the Panchayat period to the Republic era. The book analyzes the cases of state media reform, international media assistance, national communication policy processes, media movements, and the cinema industry. Maharjan, a former senior researcher



at Chautari, is currently completing his tenure as a Global Postdoctoral Scholar at the Northwestern University in Qatar. He is one of the leading media scholars of Nepal and has published extensively on the subject.

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Chautari member and historian Surabhi Pudasaini has recently launched a substack called *Back Up a Sec: Unwritten Histories from Nepal and Beyond*. The weekly posts will bring resonant stories from and reflections on the Nepali-language archives into subscribers' inboxes and lives. You can access the substack at: <https://backupasec.substack.com/welcome>

For the first year, *Back Up a Sec* will tell the story of a complicated, dense, and illuminating family dispute over inheritance—what else, right?—that played out in the 1870s and 1880s in a household in Naradevi, Kathmandu. To delve into the anatomy of this dispute, Surabhi will also publish a sequel extending to the 1920s and a prequel starting in the 1870s. Through this serialized story spanning a year, subscribers will gain insights into aspects of family, economy, law, and society, as well as how individuals and households could—or failed to—manage transgressions, crisis, and repair in the past.



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