

Abstracts for Michael Hutt Symposium

Panel 1

MIGRATION, DISPLACEMENT AND DIASPORA

1. Locating 'Home' and 'Identity' for the Indian-Nepalis: Reflections on two essays by Michael Hutt

Rosy Chamling, Department of English, Sikkim University

Abstract

The issue of Indian-Nepali identity is a vexed one. There is a rich legacy of literary representations of Nepali migration to India and the consequent settling in India (*Mughlan*) after having migrated from Nepal (*Muluk*) in all its *dukkha* and emotional stirrings by writers like Lil Bahadur Chettri in *Basai* (1957-58), Lainsingh Bangdel in *Muluk Bahira*, Govind Raj Bhattarai in *Mughlan* (1974), works by Indra Bahadur Rai and other such writings. These writings are expressions of the deep-seated angst of the Nepalis who had to leave their ancestral home and settle in a foreign land like India in search of better employment prospects. However, such a cross-border phenomenon has also resulted in them being viewed with suspect and their identity being questioned till today. Despite their contribution to the building of modern India, they suffer with citizenship issues and there seems to be a problem in their acceptance as true Indians. It is a known fact that the first wave of migration began in the 18th century onwards (Gaenzle, 2002: 334) but it was the British colonization project in the 19th century which pulled several Nepalis to come to India to work in its tea industry, road and railway line projects. Besides the establishment of Gurkha enlistment centres in India, particularly after the Anglo-Gorkha war in 1814-16, also proved a lucrative opportunity for young men to come to India. Unlike the classic case of diaspora as enunciated by William Safran and Robin Cohen, which always envisions a diasporic community of carrying collective memories of their homeland, the Indian-Nepalis do not wish for an eventual return to their *Muluk*. For them, India is their home and Indian is their identity. My presentation would focus on this issue of Indian-Nepali identity by taking into consideration two phenomenal essays by eminent Professor Michael Hutt titled 'Where is home for an Indian Nepali writer?' published in 2009 and 'Being Nepali without Nepal: Reflections on South Asian Diaspora' in 1997. Through a close reading of these two essays, I intend to grapple with the vexed issue of Indian-Nepali identity and to study the emergence of a cohesive identity for the Indian-Nepali being fraught with deep-seated insecurity. The rise of various nomenclatures (which are used interchangeably) for them like Gorkha, Gorkhali, Bharpali, Nepamul, suggest that 'for the Nepalis of India the search for an appropriate term that indicates Indian nationality as which does not confuse them with the 'Nepalese' has long been a genuine concern' (Subba, 1992: 68). The writers writing in Nepali about Nepalis settled in India is a reflection how the Nepali language has been successful

in binding them as one despite the actuality of 'home' being a site of fractured identity. It is the use and flourishing of one key determiner of language (Nepali) as the lingua franca between people belonging from various *jati* and classes, that the common Indian-Nepali identity is forged.

Keywords

Home (*muluk*), Foreign (*muglan*), Identity, Indian-Nepali.

2. Bhutanese Refugee Crisis: Twenty years after 'Unbecoming Citizens'

Lopita Nath, University of the Incarnate Word

Abstract

Since 2008 almost 96, 000 Bhutanese refugees have been resettled in the United States of America. After 20 years or more in refugee camps in Nepal and several failed negotiations by the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees to repatriate the refugees back to Bhutan, third country resettlement became the only solution. After the first wave of arrivals, Bhutanese refugees began to arrive in large numbers, until last year when only about 7,000 refugees have remained in the two of the seven camps in Southeastern Nepal. A decade of resettlement, and one of the greatest success stories of third-country resettlement, was still fraught with questions. Was resettlement easy? The Resettlement agencies provide assistance and aid to the refugees to start their life in the United States. However, despite the efforts to help them achieve self-sufficiency, the Bhutanese refugees face innumerable complexities, like the language barrier, unemployment, inability to find jobs commensurate to their educational qualifications, and the problems of adjustment faced by the elderly, including the high rate of suicide among them, which stand in the way of an easy resettlement. Twenty years after Michael Hutt published his seminal work on Bhutanese Refugees, the problem still exists, although in a not so different way. The Bhutanese refugees though resettled in a third country, with few still living in the two camps, are still bitter and ambiguous about their relations with Bhutan. Drawing on this and other writings by Hutt on the Bhutanese refugees, this paper will examine the refugee situation as it exists today. Hutt's work, based on deep research and anecdotes of the refugees, remains a very important evidence of Bhutanese refugee history and is used by the resettled refugees to tell their story to their children, born in the camps and in the U.S. who have no memory and are becoming detached from their parents' history and memory. As they negotiate the issues of cultural differences, citizenship, home and identity in their new home, the history of their life as refugees, become increasingly important for their survival and growth as new citizens in a third country. They are looking for answers, especially on the issue of repatriation to Bhutan, and some solution for the 7000 Bhutanese refugees that still live in the two camps in Nepal. For scholars on the crisis, then, now and the future, Michael Hutt's work laid the foundation for a deeper understanding of and for the Bhutanese refugees themselves, as they tell their story, hold on to their memory, in recreating aspects of their homeland in their new home, which gives something

to the different generations of Bhutanese-Nepalis to hold onto, in a land far from home and continue to carve out a meaningful existence, both in the U.S. and in Nepal.

Keywords

Bhutanese Refugees, Resettlement, Repatriation, citizenship, and homeland

3. Migration and the Suffering of Nepali-Speaking People in the Himalayan Region

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Abstract

Contrary to how the Himalayan region has long been exoticised in Western eyes as an untouched and static 'Himalayan Shangri-la', different forms of mobility and migration have been central to the economic and political life and livelihoods of Nepali speaking population in the Himalayan region. Michael Hutt's book *Unbecoming Citizens* exposes the suffering of people of Nepali ethnic origin who were forced to migrate from their country in the early 1990s. Similarly, Hutt translated a very popular Nepali novel *Basai* (trans. *Mountain Painted with Turmeric*) written by Lila Bahadur Chetri, which portrays the life of Dhane Basnet and his family in a hill village in eastern Nepal who were forced to leave the village due to poverty, debt, and economic exploitation. Drawing on inspiration from Michael Hutt's work on migration and the suffering of Nepali-speaking people in the Himalayan region, this paper extends his work to think about rich possibilities for research on labour mobility and forced migration in the region and beyond. Specifically, Hutt's work allows for a context-specific analysis of the precarity of migrants in the context of Nepali and Bhutani state policies that forced people to migrate, and how the same Bhutanese refugees and migrant workers from the poorer households from Nepal are now integrated into the racialised and unequal geographies of global mobility of labour.

Panel 2

LANGUAGE, POLITICS AND NATIONALISM

4. Realising Peace and Change through Law in the Aftermath of Conflict in Nepal

Sara Bertotti, SOAS University of London

Abstract

The objective of my paper is to illustrate the role of law in the translation of the aspirations for change in Nepal in the aftermath of the 1996-2006 internal conflict and the Second People's Movement. The 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement of Nepal (CPA) promised 'an inclusive, democratic and progressive restructuring of the state by ending the current centralized and

unitary form of the state in order to address the problems related to women, Dalit, indigenous people, Janajatis, Madheshi, oppressed, neglected and minority communities and backward regions by ending discrimination based on class, caste, language, gender, culture, religion, and region'.¹ While internationally Nepal's transition to peace is often regarded as a success story, more critical voices have looked at the CPA as, at best, a half-fulfilled promise. As noted by Hutt, the short 'window of opportunity for popular consensus' opened with the conclusion of the fighting and the People's Movement 'began to narrow' after the signing of the CPA and 'slammed shut' after the publication of the 2007 Interim Constitution.² My paper expands the analysis of the narrowing space for change through a study of the interplay between key political developments in the constitutional process and the role of the Supreme Court of Nepal during the transitional period (2006-2015) that speaks to Hutt's conclusion that provisions in the 2015 Constitution embodying 'partial fulfilments of longstanding minority demands [...] concede enough to reduce long-term support for continued oppositional activity, without providing much of a foundation for building provincial units that might challenge the federal state' or, for entirely supplanting male Khas-Arya privilege.³ This analysis is accompanied by a study of key debates on quotas, transitional justice and the third gender in Nepal to illustrate how law struggles to capture the larger meanings which underpin aspirations for change. Overall, my paper argues that law has proved to be an unreliable ally for creative and emancipatory change in the context of the transition to peace in Nepal.

Keywords

Constitution, Peace, Change, Law, Transition

5. Imagining a Plural Nepal: Language, Inclusion, and Diversity in Multilingual School Textbooks

Uma Pradhan, University College London

Abstract

When the Constitution of 1990 declared Nepal a multi-ethnic (*bahujatiya*) and multilingual (*bahubhasik*) country, this gave a new language of inclusion and diversity in the imagination of Nepal. This new development, while may not have made substantive changes, nonetheless created spaces for the otherwise-marginalised languages in public space and made discursive shifts in the understanding of the Nepali nation. Within this conception of New Nepal, the constitution also opened up possibilities to use 'new languages' i.e. mother tongue in school education, at least for primary education. With the Nepali state becoming increasingly vocal in

¹ CPA Art 3.5

² Michael Hutt, 'Singing the New Nepal' (2012) 18 Nations and Nationalism 320.

³ Michael Hutt, 'Before the Dust Settled: Is Nepal's 2015 Settlement a Seismic Constitution?' (2020) 20 Conflict, Security & Development 395.

its discourse on diversity, multi-ethnicity and social inclusion, mother-tongue education is also utilised to showcase its commitment to these values. In this presentation, I will analyse mother-tongue school textbooks to explore how these new languages have been used in the imagination of the Nepali nation. Professor Hutt's scholarship has long emphasised the centrality of language in the social and political vision of the Nepali state and the construction of Nepali nationalism. His seminal works also draw attention to the role of language and literature in shaping as well as understanding this public imagination. I draw inspiration from Professor Hutt's work in two ways. First, by analysing the contents of mother tongue textbooks, I will illustrate the discursive nature of Nepal's politics and the imagination of the nation. Second, in this presentation, I will approach school textbooks as crucial literature that shapes public imagination, especially among young citizens. How different languages occupy public spaces and how they are used to construct the stories of the nation can help us understand the competing voices in the nation's imagination. As Professor Hutt points out in his analysis of the new national anthem, the celebration of multiple ethnicities, languages and religions is presented as 'symbolic shorthand for inclusive and progressive nation'. Attention to these narratives enables us to appreciate how certain ideas may persist or reconfigure during different periods. While Nepal undoubtedly moved from monolingualism to multilingualism as an ideology of state-making, anxieties of national disintegration and ethnic fragmentation continue to shape the normative vocabularies of the post-1990 narratives. Through this analysis, I will highlight the interconnectedness of language, education, and politics in Nepal.

Keywords

multi-lingual, school education, diversity, inclusion, nationalism

Relevant Readings

Hutt, M. 1986. 'Diversity and Change in the Languages of Highland Nepal'. *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 14(1): 1–24.

Hutt, M. 1988. *Nepali: A National Language and Its Literature*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers and London: SOAS.

Hutt, M. 1993. *Nepal in the Nineties*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Hutt, M. 2012. 'Singing the New Nepal'. *Nations and Nationalism* 18(2): 306–325.

Hutt and Onta. 2017. *Political Change and Public Culture in post-1990 Nepal*. Cambridge University Press.

6. Being Nepali with and without New Nepal

John Whelpton, Independent Scholar

Abstract

The paper addresses issues extensively discussed in Michael Hutt's work, including in particular his chapter in Gellner et al. (1997 and 2008), 'Being Nepali without Nepal', a title adapted from my own unpublished paper, 'Being Nepali: the construction of a National Identity in South Asia.' The foundations of a shared sense Nepali identity have in the past included attachment to the hill country as opposed to the plains, the Nepali language's developing role as a lingua franca within the hills, incorporation since the late 18th century within a single state structure and, before 2006, Hinduism and allegiance to a Maharaja or Maharajadhiraj, whose functions included upholding the Hindu order. Aspects of this identity were already contested within the country before the establishment of the Federal Republic of Nepal, with the paradox of a hill—dominated state incorporating the economically vital segment of the Gangetic plain and also ethnic claims advanced in both hill and plains against the homogenising drive that reached its zenith in the Panchayat era. Since the adoption of the 2015 constitution, ethnic assertion appears, at least for the moment, to have subsided but the divide between hill and plains remains a key issue. Also still problematic is the position of those outside Nepal who retain an identity as Nepalis as they often face difficulties both in gaining full acceptance from those among whom they now live and also in retaining political rights within Nepal, which does not recognise dual citizenship. As well as briefly surveying the current situation in Bhutan, a particular focus of Michael Hutt's scholarship, in Darjeeling and in Sikkim, the paper will look in detail at the Limpiyadhura border dispute, an example of how assertiveness against India continues to serve as a tempting tool for a government wishing to burnish its nationalist credentials but also potentially worsen the problems of those in India who are still seen as Nepali. There will finally be consideration of the more recent Nepali 'diaspora' outside South Asia and at the fundamental question of how the increasingly transnational nature of social networks calls may makes it necessary to rethink the role of the nation state itself.

Keywords

Nationalism, ethnicity, tarai, Limpiyadhura, Hinduism

7. The Memory Palace: Narayanhiti's Dark Heritage Recreation

Bryony Whitmarsh, University of Southampton; Stefanie Lotter, SOAS University of London;

Abstract

Dark tourism is defined as the in-person or digital approach to sites 'associated with death and tragedy around the world, where tourists visit with varying motivations' (Barthory, 2018). It is the engagement with sites of living memory (Lennon and Foley, 2001) thriving in the ability to connect remains and people through exhibits, objects and spaces in a dramatic recreation (McDaniel, 2018).

The Narayanhiti Palace Museum, or more specifically the Tribhuvan Sadan, the site of the Royal Massacre of 2001, is such a destination where curious and voyeuristic dark tourists expect historical revelations and a more tangible understanding of the implosion of the Nepalese Monarchy. While the curated materiality of the palace does not live up to such promise, the site stands as an example of how public memory in a post-truth era desires sensationalism, explanations and Instagrammable locations. Michael Hutt's 'The Royal Palace Massacre, Conspiracy Theories and Nepali Street Literature', until recently, his most read article, is a testimony of the public interest in the violent historical event and the site, an interest that has been capitalised on through the physical reconstruction of Tribhuvan Sadan. We build on Michael Hutt's work through an exploration of the site of the massacre as heritage - remains deliberately selected from the past and destined to stay. His article took a cultural studies perspective, centring on the development of conspiracy theories. We, on the other hand, study the 'memory palace' as a tangible heritage site, and look at the underlying motivations for those who work at, manage, interpret, fund, visit and write about the site, building on studies of dark tourism. Here conspiracy conflicts with curatorial decisions to enhance memory through recreation at a historic time when memories fade. We find that careful negotiations of authenticity are an afterthought in representative techniques at the Narayanhiti museum and suggest that the absence of evidence of the massacre has enabled the palace to become a space for people to investigate the Nepali nation.

Keywords

Conspiracy, museum, fabrication, heritage, public memory

Panel 3

LITERATURE, PUBLIC SPHERE AND COMMUNICATION

8. Reading Culture: Tastes and Preferences in Rural Nepal

Krishna P. Adhikari, University of Oxford; David N. Gellner, University of Oxford;

Abstract

As a tribute to Michael Hutt and as a small complement to his huge contribution in making Nepali literature better known outside Nepal, we offer an analysis of the reception of literary products within Nepal, based on a Cultural Consumption Survey that asked about tastes and preferences in this and other aspects of culture. The survey was conducted in Kaski district in 2015-16 and in Banke and Bajhang districts in 2022. Unsurprisingly, religious texts are by far the most popular and these are often consumed by listening rather than by reading for oneself. Among modern authors, Laxmi Prasad Devkota, a prominent fixture in school textbooks, is by some margin the most known and liked across regions and by all social

groups. There are small differences by literacy status and region, and more significant differences by generation, which are discussed in the paper. By and large many big names in the metropolis are unknown and unread. We will attempt to locate literary consumption within the wider context of cultural consumption and both traditional and modern skills.

9. Talking about Not Talking: From 'Empty Words' to 'Dead Silence'

Kathryn S. March, Cornell University

Michael Hutt's work on Nepali language and literature has been pivotal to the emergence of Nepal Studies in Europe and America. This paper looks beyond both publication and the Nepali language, somewhere down the long dark alley of (self-)censorship (see Hutt, Michael (2006) 'Things That Should Not Be Said: Censorship and Self-Censorship in the Nepali Press Media, 2001–02.' *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 65 (2), pp. 361–392), to trace the images of speaking and silence in Tamang women's talk. Most sociolinguistic studies of silence have looked at the incidences of actual silence in people's speech. This paper, broadly based upon field research among Tamang of north central highland Nepal, and specifically upon fourteen women's life history narratives recorded there, looks what these women *said* about their silences. As Tamang women talked to me about talking and about not talking, they explored the unique potential of both speech and nonspeech to communicate and the special problems listeners must face in trying to understand others' silences. From what is seen as the 'emptiness' inherent in the ability of speech--as 'just talk'--to belie reality, to the apparent aggressiveness of speech in giving people 'talkings-to', to the capabilities of speech to contest meaning in 'talking back,' this paper looks at the multiple possible interpretations of silence, as imposed, voluntary, involve, or withdrawn.

Keywords

Nepal, Tamang, sociolinguistics, silence

10. The Identity and Politics of Street Theatre in Janakpurham

Monica Mottin, Heidelberg University

The work of Michael Hutt particularly inspired me to look at the role of language and cultural production in relation to politics and history, thus blending political, social and cultural analysis of social change to understand their interactions. It is difficult to single out a single book, because they were all influential, but 'Nepal in the 1990s: Versions of the Past, Vision of the Future' was a pivotal collection that helped me understand Nepal's history and that I still revisit from time to time but so are many others of his books. I also appreciated a lot Michael Hutt's work on censorship and the public sphere.

Paper Abstract

Grounded on the Maithili language movement in the 1980s, street theatre in Janakpurdham emerged out of political struggle, pretty much like street theatre in Kathmandu. But it would be a mistake to consider street theatre in Janakpurdham an offspring of the movement that animated the capital, which was in fact the product of diverse experiences of artists originally from different parts of Nepal. Street theatre in Janakpur finds inspiration in local idioms and struggles and throughout the years has vehiculated both identity and political claims. Besides producing 'development' plays for NGO projects, artists often engage in performing street theatre for government run 'educational' campaigns and to advertise political leaders' agendas during elections. These are the only economically viable forms of streets theatre that allow artists to continue their work, including street theatre performed on voluntary basis during recent movements for democracy. Based on fieldwork carried out in 2022 and 2023, as well as archival research and document analysis, this paper will first trace the origin of Maithil drama and its strong relation to public spaces. After looking at the historical evolution of street theatre in Janakpurdham, I will focus on two case studies. The first will analyse the performance of the play 'Parivartan' staged by ACT (Action Community Theatre) during one of the Madhes movements. The second case study will focus on the life narratives of two female artists who explain how they developed their artistic work despite gender constrains.

Keywords

Maithili language, street theatre, identity, gender, democracy, development