

The Seventh Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and the Himalaya
Kathmandu, Nepal
25-27, July 2018

PANEL ABSTRACT

Ethnographies of Infrastructure: Roads, State Building and Everyday Practice in Nepal's Agrarian Districts

This panel brings together papers presenting different facets of preliminary research findings from a five-year research project entitled *Infrastructures of Democracy: State Building as Everyday Practice in Nepal's Agrarian Districts*. The project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, is comprised of several nested scales of collaboration. These include: core research teams based at the University of Toronto, the University of British Columbia and the Martin Chautari Research and Policy Institute; peer researchers based in the three district-scale research sites; and group of scholars and policy makers serving as collaborators in an advisory capacity.

Launched in 2015, *Infrastructures of Democracy* employs comparative ethnographic methods and deliberative public engagement to explore how people enact and participate in 'democracy' in contexts of governmental transition. Through a focus on infrastructure governance, the research explores how everyday practices at the sub-national scale constitute state building, and how they enable or constrain transformative social change. To do so, the project builds on the following core research questions: What are the political economic relations within which road building takes place? What competing governmental rationalities and practices are evidenced in road development processes? How are prevailing cultural politics reproduced or transformed in people's everyday engagements with the local state?

The papers in this panel are intended to share—and solicit critical engagement with—preliminary research findings. This opportunity for feedback in an academic venue will be complemented with a policy oriented analysis workshop also planned for July 2018. Each paper presents a different set of findings and analyses that speak to different dimensions of the larger project's core questions and reflect the authors' varied perspectives and positionings. They include ethnographic insights from researchers based in district field sites—highlighting both common themes and context-specific divergences in everyday experiences and articulations of road development—discussions of shifts within governmental rationalities based on the analysis of policy and program documents, as well as reflexive methodological considerations for studies of state-citizen relations.

PANEL CHAIR: Sara Shneiderman, Department of Anthropology, University of British Columbia

PAPER 1: Rural Roads Matters: Debate and Practice of Road Building in the Eastern Plains of Nepal

Lagan Rai, Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University

The paper is written against the backdrop of two key trends in road development in Nepal. First, government and donor agencies have, since the inception of the modern development era, invested extensively in building 'strategic roads', or highways. Since the 1970s, under the auspices of regional planning, most of this investment has concentrated on North-South highways that were intended to diffuse population pressure in the hills by resettling hill migrants in the tarai's fertile land. Second, rural roads, which are arguably more relevant to day-to-day life for the majority of the population than highways, have become a focus of development only after the democratic reforms of 1990. This paper focuses on rural road building in the southern plains of Morang district, which is a highly contested process embedded with the wider issues of regional politics, ethnicity, inequality, floods, displacement, migration, markets, real state business, corruption, remittance, industrialization, urbanizations and agrarian change. Ethnographic study of the road must capture these complex articulations—and the paper explores the methodological and theoretical challenges. By focusing on rural roads in the Tarai, the paper aims to [a] foreground the significance of studying rural infrastructure and [b] challenge hill-centric ideology of development and its representation of Tarai populations and livelihoods.

PAPER 2: The Politics of the road: Ethnography of Charikot-Singati-Lamabager road of Dolakha, Central Nepal

Shyam Bdr. Kunwar, Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University

This paper presents an ethnographic study of the Charikot-Singati-Lamabagar road of Central Nepal. Ethnographic details from the road offer insights into other domains such as government policies and practices, people's participation in road development and its sociality. This paper engages the ethnographic method to explore the actors and institutions engaged in the politics of roads, place-specific road knowledges and the variability of road-society articulations. The paper is structured around two key research provocations. First, it explores the genesis of the Charikot-Singati-Lamabagar road including the road imaginaries that have shaped its development and contemporary geographies. Second, it addresses the multi-faceted interrelationship between the road and hydropower development projects. Bringing ethnographic insights to bear on these interrelated questions, the paper illustrates how changing labor relations associated with road development, road alignment politics, and road building practices are mediated by the materiality and imaginative dynamics of roads—and play a significant role in the mundane space of everyday life. I argue that beyond the technology of road infrastructure, we need to situate studies of road development in the multiple exigencies and power relations of everyday life at the grassroots level – the road is a political site.

PAPER 3: **Corruption, road building and the politics of social science research in post-conflict Nepal**

Katharine Rankin, Department of Geography and Planning, University of Toronto

Tulasi Sharan Sigdel, Director of Studies, Nepal Administrative Staff College

Elsie Lewison, Department of Geography and Planning, University of Toronto

In the context of research on road development in post-conflict Nepal, we regularly hear about corruption—from planner-bureaucrats, from development practitioners, from policy makers and from residents of communities who become involved in road building in numerous capacities, as labourers, politicians, contractors, entrepreneurs and travellers. The mainstream donor grey literature on road development, moreover, is replete with an “anti-corruption” discourse that directly and explicitly informs practice. Rarely have we encountered a single issue that so animates a range of actors within the relational space forged by encounters among (donors,) states and citizens. This paper explores that rapidly transforming relational space in three ways, thus staking out a methodological approach to the study of state-citizen relations.

First, we consider procurement policies for road construction in agrarian districts where the state-citizen interface is most palpable, with a special focus on how that interface is represented and with what governmental objectives (discourse analysis of policy documents). Second, we examine the gaps between procurement policy and practice by comparing the first hand accounts of contractors, laborers, and government bureaucrats involved in rural road construction—in order to reveal modes of citizen subjectivity and state governmentality that come into play (semi-structured interviews). Third, we investigate the state-citizen dynamics evident in a particular road tendering event (observation). Together these methods constitute a qualitative methodology oriented to research as praxis. They also highlight corruption itself as a relational construct requiring research to navigate a tension between on the one hand making visible the real, material harms produced by corrupt practices in specific place-time conjunctures, while on the other hand mitigating the risk that such accounts could end up pathologizing poor, rural populations and underwriting regressive reforms. We point to the need for ethnographically grounded, context-sensitive work, to build a robust analysis of the cultural politics of corruption, as a key site of encounter between citizens and the state.