Introduction to the special issue

Toward a relational approach to the state: Understanding social and political transformation in Nepal

This special issue presents a collection of articles that explore the relational nature of the state in the context of social and political transformation in Nepal. Nepal has gone through enormous social and political changes over the last three decades - including the People's Movement in 1990, a decade-long Maoist 'People's War', identity-based political mobilisations, territorial restructuring, and coping with the aftermath of a serious earthquake. During this period, the Nepali state has changed from an authoritarian Hindu Kingdom to a secular federal democratic Republic. By foregrounding this continually changing and evolving nature of the state, the articles in this special issue will focus on the ways in which the state 'comes into being' in relation to different actors, ideas and institutions. In doing so, the articles will explore the multiple manifestations of state in everyday contexts and appreciate the dialectical process that leads to constant reinvention, change and unintended consequences. Using Nepal as a lens, the papers will extend our broader objective to understanding the multiple, and often contradictory, dynamics on the relational nature of the state in South Asia.

In the recent years, the state has gained interest as an object of academic inquiry and an important player in the development policy, especially due to the expanding discourses of rights and accountability, demands for citizenship, and proliferation of movement towards inclusiveness and equity. However, the difficulty in unpacking the notion of state, both theoretically and empirically, has continued to pose a challenge.[1] The perceived unity of the state as a strong and normative authority is now strongly contested through fine-grained analysis that reveals its fragmented and conflictual nature. However, while these analyses on state highlight its authority as 'something tentative and unstable', the approaches to understanding the state continue to see it as a site of 'structural violence'[2], source of 'repeated

---

[1] Philip Abrams, 'Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State', in *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 1 no. 1(1988), pp. 58–89.

[2] Akhil Gupta, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

acts of violence'[3], 'areas of violent simplifications'[4], whereby the state exerts various forms of authority and control.[5]

In Nepal, the literature that emerged during and after the Maoist 'People's War' and the one that focuses on identity-based mobilisation highlighted this violent history of state formation.[6] The scholars drew attention to the oppression by the Nepali state, and the ways in which elites gained greater influence and control over state institutions.[7] The homogenising tendencies of the Nepali state and the ideas of monolithic nationalism were brought under tight scrutiny.[8] Some also went on to declare it as a 'failed state'.[9] The state, therefore, was challenged, resisted, and resented.[10]

Even in the case of so-called 'fragile states' like Nepal, the state is also a provider of services. The limits in the effective functioning of public services notwithstanding, there are provisions of (free) public schooling, health services, and democratic governance in Nepal. In this empirical context, the perspective on the state as coercive and dysfunctional provides only a partial and thus incomplete view. The key challenge for the Nepali state, as Gellner points out, 'is to retain its authority, and fulfil its promise of development, without ascending to authoritarianism'.[11] This special issue intends to nuance this overwhelmingly undesirable image of the Nepali state and highlights the constantly evolving and contested nature of the state. In this process, we pay attention to the simultaneously existing dimensions of the coercive and the benevolent state. The papers in this issue contribute to the emerging body of literature that is beginning to pay attention to the ways in which people cope with the newfound challenges and opportunities in the changing social and political context of Nepal.[12]

---

[3] Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, *Sovereign bodies: citizens, migrants, and states in the postcolonial world* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

[4] David Graeber, /Dead Zones of the Imagination: On Violence, Bureaucracy, and Interpretive Labor. The Malinowski Memorial Lecture 2006' in *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, Vol 2 no 2 (2012), pp. 105–128.

[5] James Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve Have Failed* (New Haven, CT, USA: Yale University Press, 1998).

[6] For a comprehensive review, see Sara Shneiderman, Luke Wagner, Jacob Rinck, Amy L. Johnson and Austin Lord, 'Nepal's Ongoing Political Transformation: A review of post-2006 literature on conflict, the state, identities and end environments' in *Modern Asian Studies, Vol* 50 no. 6(2016), pp. 2014-2114 ; Michael Hutt, *Himalayan People's War: Nepal's Maoist Rebellion*, (London: Hurst and Company, 2004).

[7] Govinda Neupane, *Nepàlko Jàtāya Prasna: Sàmàjik Banoñ ra Sàjhedàrāko Sambhàwanà* (Kathmandu: Centre for Development Studies, 2000) ; Om Gurung, M. S. Tamang, and M. Turin, *Perspectives on Social Inclusion and Exclusion in Nepal*, (Kathmandu: Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, 2014).

[8] Krishna Bhattachan, 'Ethnopolitics and ethno-development: an emerging paradigm in Nepal—with a postscript', in M. Lawoti and S. Hangen (eds), *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict: Identities and Mobilisation after 1990*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 35–57; David Gellner, J. Pfaff-Czarnecka, and J. Whelpton, *Nationalism and Ethnicity in Nepal*, (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997); Mahenrda Lawoti and Susan Hangen, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict: Identities and Mobilisation after 1990*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

[9] Ali Riaz and Subho Basu, *Paradise Lost? State failure in Nepal*, (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2007).

[10] David Gellner, *Resistance and the State: Nepalese Experiences* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2003).

[11] Ibid,. p 27

[12] Tatsuro Fujikura, *Discourses of Awareness: Development, Social Movements, and the Practice of Freedom in Nepal*, (Kathmandu: Martin Chautari, 2013); Gellner D. N. and K. Hachhethu, *Local Democracy in South Asia: Microprocesses of Democratization in Nepal and its Neighbors* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008); Arjun Guneratne, *Dalits of Nepal: Towards Dignity, Citizenship, and Justice* (Kathmandu: Himal Books, 2010);

As Fuller and Harris rightly point out in the context of India, while the state-perpetuated violence is a reality, ordinary people do not always resist the state but also use the system the best they can.[13] Through the empirical focus on the 'development programmes' of the state and the analytical focus on the 'blurred boundaries', this literature has helped us to interrogate the 'reified, instrumentalist notions of the state'.[14] In other parts of South Asia, these interactions are often studied as spaces for 'multiple modes of being' and spaces for intermittent government control for negotiation of legality.[15] Even while there is now a convincing body of ethnographic evidence that the boundaries between states and society are blurred, porous, and contextually shifting, these overlapping spaces are understood primarily as the way in which people encounter and experience the state.[16] Moreover, the idea of the state is itself seen as a form of symbolic capital that 'enters into the material power of the state-system and is reciprocally upheld by it'.[17]

The more recent literature on the state has, therefore, shifted its focus to these relational dimensions of the state as a more meaningful way to understand its everyday meanings. For this purpose, scholars have highlighted the ethical and affective aspects of institutions[18] and the mutual relation between the governing and the governed.[19] They argue that the contemporary state derives its legitimacy, at least nominally, through its commitment to social welfare and its obligation towards the citizens. In their study of Indian bureaucracy, Bear and Mathur point out that government bureaucracies can often function as 'an expression of a social contract between citizens and the state'.[20] Through the moral and political obligations, continuously performed at these sites of engagement and interactions, various categories are constantly imagined, invoked, and experienced. This relational approach helps us to appreciate the

Mahenrda Lawoti and Susan Hangen, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict: Identities and Mobilisation after 1990*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

[13] C. J. Fuller and John Harriss, 'For an anthropology of the modern Indian state', In Fuller, C. J. and Bénéï, Veronique (eds.) *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*, (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2001), p. 25.

[14] See Stuart Corbridge, *Seeing the state: governance and governmentality in India*, (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); David Moss, 'Irrigation and statecraft in Zamindary South India', In C.J. Fuller & V. Benei (eds), *The Everyday State and Society in India*, (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2001); Akhil Gupta, 'Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State', *American Ethnologist*, Vol 22 no 2 (1995), pp. 375- 402; Fiona Wilson, 'In the name of the state? School and Teachers in Andean Province', In C.J. Fuller & V. Benei (eds), *The Everyday State and Society in India*, (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2001), pp. 137–162.

[15] See Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); J S. Anjaria, 'Ordinary states: everyday corruption and the politics of space in Mumbai', *American Ethnologist*, Vol 38 (2011), pp. 58–72.

[16] C. J. Fuller and John Harriss, 'For an anthropology of the modern Indian state', In Fuller, C. J. and Bénéï, Veronique (eds.) *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*, (London: C. Hurst & Co. Publishers, 2001), p. 24; Akhil Gupta, 'Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State', *American Ethnologist*, Vol 22 no 2 (1995), pp. 375- 402;

[17] C. J. Fuller and John Harriss, 'For an anthropology of the modern Indian state', p. 5.

[18] Laura Bear and Nayanika Mathur, 'Introduction: remaking the public good: a new anthropology of bureaucracy', *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, Vol 33 no 1 (2015), pp. 18-34.

[19] Andrea Nightingale, 'Power and politics in climate change adaptation efforts: Struggles over authority and recognition in the context of political instability', *Geoforum*, Vol 84 (2017), pp. 11–20.

[20] Laura Bear and Nayanika Mathur, 'Introduction: remaking the public good: a new anthropology of bureaucracy', p. 18.

blurriness of the state-society boundary while opening up an opportunity to 'engage with both practices and ideas' that shape state-citizen relations.[21]

In the context of Kyrgyzstani migrant workers in Russia, Reeves et al. illustrate a variety of mechanism, including the production of different migration documents that make the state visible.[22] Similarly, taking an example of urban planning on the outskirts of Maputo, Mozambique, Nielsen illustrates a vivid image of informal attempts to mimic state-defined urban standards by urban house-builders in order to make themselves 'visible to the states'.[23] Thelen, Vetters and von Benda-Beckman in their edited volume discussing state images and practices in various European states describe the state as a 'relational setting'.[24] They explain that state comes into existence within the relations between actors 'who negotiate over ideas of legitimate power by drawing on existing state images – at once re-affirming and transforming these representations within concrete practices'.[25] In line with studies done in other parts of the world, this special issue uses the 'relational space' as an analytically useful vantage point to analyse the relational dimensions of the state and the various actors that constitute it, and understand how these relations come into being, is maintained, challenged and reconfigured.

Exploring the Nepali state: cross-cutting themes

In Nepal, the idea of the state is commonly represented in three ways through the emic terms *rastra* (state), *sarkar* (political leadership and/or government institutions), and *desh* (country of belonging).In the historical account of nation-state in Nepal, Bughart identifies *desh* as the 'realm within which the king of Gorkha exercised his ritual authority'.[26] While this definition helps us to understand the ways in which this notion was to institute the king's authority, in the everyday exchanges, the term *desh* exudes a sense of belonging. Various researches in Nepali diaspora around the world have shown *that desh* provides an affective association with Nepal regardless of physical proximity (reference). Increasingly, as the social and political transition is going on, the terms *rastra* and *rajya* have entered common parlance in Nepal. The dynamics around federal restructuring, Maoist 'Peoples' War', various political transition, and constitution rewriting have brought the possibility of making claims on and changes in *rastra*. In turn, leading to intense academic and political debates on whether Nepal is better understood as state nation or nation state.

[21] David N Gellner, *Borderland Lives in Modern South Asia*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013) p. 3.
[22] Madeleine Reeves, Johan Rasanayagam, and Judith Beyer, *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia*: *Performing Politics*, (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 2014).
[23] Morten Nielsen, 'Inverse governmentality. The Paradoxical Production of Peri-Urban Planning in Maputo, Mozambique', *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol 31, no 3 (2011): 329-35.
[24] Tatjana Thelen, Larissa Vetters and Keebet von Benda-Beckman, Stategraphy: Towards a relational anthropology of the state, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017)
[25] Ibid., p. 7.
[26] Burghart, Richard. 'The Formation of the Concept of Nation-State in Nepal' *Journal of Asian Studies* Vol 44 no 1 (1984). pp. 104.

At the same time, in practical terms, the rights and entitlement are claimed from *sarkar* mainly refer to the current political leadership and/or government bureaucracy that are responsible for providing public services. These filter down and are in everyday contexts encountered through local authorities units such as the municipality (*nagarpalika*) or the ward (*wada*) and village development committee (*ga bi sa* or *gaon palika*). The papers in this special issue approach the state through different mediating bodies and across Nepal: from the rural districts of Jumla, Gorkha and Khotang to the urban municipalities of Ilam and Kathmandu. Despite the difference in scale and geographical location, the papers speak into following major cross-cutting themes.

Bureaucratic encounters, institutionalised categories and personal networks

The spaces of personal and intimate interactions between state officials and everyday actors are one of the most visible manifestations of the relational nature of the state. In the papers in this collection, the bureaucratic encounters between the state officials and citizens have been presented a key site where the state and citizens make themselves visible to each other. As the two papers by Lewison and Chhetri, respectively, show, it is through these encounters that the ideas such as 'organic district' and 'green city' are implemented. The centrality of these encounters and personal networks are also clearly visible in the two papers by Rankin et al. and Nightingale et al. Taking the empirical case of infrastructural projects in Nepal, Rankin et al. show how the road-building project emerges as a key site where state becomes most visible through bureaucratic encounters and personal networks. Nightingale et al.'s paper highlights how the local level government structure emerges as a new 'contested spaces of belonging'. Similarly, in Pradhan's paper, moral and political obligations towards the institutional category of 'adivasi janajati' create new spaces of state-citizen interaction. In these new spaces, we are able to discern a variety of bureaucratic encounters that give new meanings to these categories of belongingness.

Citizenship, rights and process of exclusion

The collection of papers in this special issue indicate a variety of ways in which meanings of citizenship are being forged in contemporary Nepal. Valentin's paper shows the ways in which the ideas and practices of 'political' citizenship are intricately linked with 'social' citizenship and the ways in which these ideas shape the claims to social rights by the residents of squatter settlement in urban Kathmandu. The urban poor's demands for basic social services provide a space for approaching the state and making claims over social rights. The new forms of citizenship emerge strongly in the papers by Nightingale et al.; Pradhan; and Lewison where not only new demands are being made on the state institutions to provide services but new knowledges are being instilled to make these demands. The ideas of inclusive business (Lewison), inclusiveness and equity (Pradhan), local rule (Nightingale et al.), and creation of the public (Parajuli) are shaping the new logics of governance. The papers by Valentin and Pradhan also suggest that the normative ideas on 'formal' nature of citizenship might impede a wider distribution of social rights. These new meanings also offer insights into the gradual

expansion of the idea and practices of the state as a provider of functional public services delivery.

Contradictions of and prospects for the 'failed state'

Going beyond the narratives of state failure, the papers in this collection also highlight the contradictions of and prospects for the 'failed state' such as Nepal. By shifting the focus to what states do when they work, the papers draw our attention to the tensions and contradictors inherent in the way the state materialises in the everyday lives of its citizens. Valentin' paper shows that the 'multiple faces' of state that is at the same time aggressive but also potentially protective due to its tendency to overlook its responsibilities reflects wider urban governance. Similarly, Parajuli's paper shows that the conflictual relationship between Nepali state and citizens created public libraries as a nascent but budding public sphere. The papers by Nightingale et al. and Rankin et al. also show how these contradictory functions of the state blur the functions and duties of state. All the papers in this collection show that the state is increasingly held accountable to provide services. However, the papers also indicate that the idea of a failed state also contributes to shaping this relationship in different ways.

Conclusion

The papers in this issue contribute to the growing body of literature on the state, by specifically focussing on the ways in everyday practices of and/or about the state is embedded in different webs of relations. We highlight that the state 'comes into being' through a variety of processes such as bureaucratic encounters, institutionalised categories and claims of citizenship. By taking the social and political transformation of the Nepali state as an empirical vantage point, the papers draw our attention to the ways in which the state is represented, negotiated and transformed in relation to different actors, ideas, and institutions. In this special issue, we suggest that it is precisely in these everyday practices that we can unpack the relational nature of the state and the ongoing process of state-making.