

SAI

SÜDASIEN-INSTITUT
SOUTH ASIA INSTITUTE



UNIVERSITÄT
HEIDELBERG
ZUKUNFT
SEIT 1386

SOUTH ASIA INSTITUTE PAPERS
BEITRÄGE DES SÜDASIEN-INSTITUTS HEIDELBERG

Prof. Dr. Axel Michaels
Nepal in the World

ISSUE 01 2018
20. 4. 2018

ISSN 2365-399X

CONTACT

South Asia Institute
Heidelberg University
Im Neuenheimer Feld 330
D-69120 Heidelberg

P: +49(0)6221-548900
F: +49(0)6221-544998
info@sai.uni-heidelberg.de
www.sai.uni-heidelberg.de

Nepal in the World

AXEL MICHAELS



This paper is an English version of the author's farewell lecture held on the 20th of July, 2016, in the old lecture hall ("Alte Aula") of Heidelberg University. It has been translated from the printed German text 'Nepal in der Welt' which appeared in 2017. A survey of Nepal and Nepal studies from pre-colonial times until present, the lecture sheds light on quite a range of topics and raises issues that are relevant for area studies just as well as for many other academic disciplines. Axel Michaels' main concern in all this is to discuss ways of understanding the 'other'. Simultaneously, true to the format of a farewell lecture, the paper contains some retrospection on Michaels' involvements, scholarly and otherwise, with Nepal.



Axel Michaels: Nepal in the World

Magnifizienz, Spectabilis, respected Ehrensenator Mr. Lautenschläger, dear friends, colleagues and students, ladies and gentlemen,

This is just a normal lecture, but it's the last one as an academic teacher at this university. Almost the only difference from past lectures in this term is that we have shifted into this room. This was necessary because lecture hall 5 in which I used to hold my Wednesday lecture series would have been too small. I am happy that you have come in such great numbers — despite this hot, almost Indian weather. Now we are at the place where I also held my inaugural lecture — by the way, it was about equanimity, a virtue that often deserted me during my academic life.

But let us come to the point. In today's one-hour lecture I will talk about the small inside the big, about a small country and its big neighbours, about its sisyphus-like uphill and downhill, about the inside and outside, about the in-between. I will talk about Nepal in the world. Or, to put it more exactly, about Nepal and its connections to the outside world. By doing so I basically pose the question of what it means to take seriously cultural variety or multi-culturality epistemologically, and not just for decoration or a threat.

And, finally, this is also a look back: on this class, on my work in Nepal, and on my academic life. And so I will tell stories, five more or less interconnected stories, which can also be taken as movements of a piece of music, unified by the recurring melody 'What can we learn from Nepal?'

1. Largo

Big and small – Nepal between India and China

Nepal is a small country. One might have overlooked it altogether. The country's ruggedness made it hard to access. In the north is the natural border of the snow-covered Himalaya Mountains, while in recent centuries, the British colonial power set the borders in the south, west and east. And the malaria-infested Himalayan foothills, called the Tarai, form another natural border. So, leaving aside a few Chinese and Tibetan monks, the exploration



of Nepal begins late, in the 17th century: with the Jesuits, the first adventurers, and the first few scholars who joined them in the middle of the 19th century. Knowledge about Nepal originated in a highly transcultural situation. The Jesuits – mostly on their transit from China to India and Europe or the other way round – wanted to know everything in order to fight the heathens with their own weapons. And at home in Europe it was the encyclopaedists who wanted to know everything and to use the Enlightenment to defeat the Jesuits. In this variously motivated drive to acquire more knowledge, the knowledge about and from Nepal accumulated slowly, all the more so since this country itself had not wanted to know anything from the world for a long time. But it was a particular, somehow *other* knowledge that had to dig its way through the hegemony of privileged knowledge.

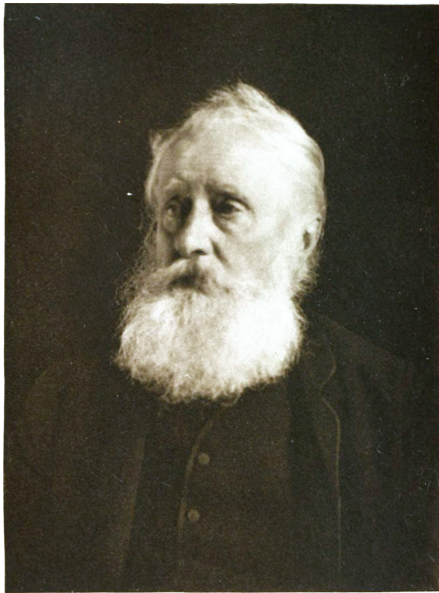
But let us take first things first. In 1662, one of the first western ‘foreigners’ reached Nepal on his way from Peking. He was the Jesuit Johann Grueber (1623–1669), born in Linz. His impression of “Necpal”, as he called it, was not very good. This is what he wrote about Nepal’s women:

But the women of these kingdoms are so ugly that they seem to look more like devils than like humans. For reasons of religion they never wash with water, but with a certain horrible oil. Apart from that it spreads a reek impossible to bear they are also so dirtied by this oil that one could not take them for humans any more, but for witches.¹

One asks oneself what Grueber saw and how he saw it. He even had a telescope in his luggage that greatly impressed king Pratāpa Malla (reign. 1641–1674) in Bhaktapur because he could use it to see his enemies approach in time. Grueber might have used it to take a closer look, after all. But he only wanted to see what he was certain of. Not only did he view the women as dirty, but also everything else that made him uncertain. Grueber

1 Kirchner, Anathasius (1667): *China monumentis, qua sacris quā profanis, nec non naturae & artis spectaculis, aliarumque rerum memorabilium argumentis illustrata*; Amsterdam, Meurs; (transl. Grueber, Johannes (1985): *Als Kundschafter des Papstes nach China 1656–1664. Die erste Durchquerung Tibets*; ed. Franz Baumann, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, p. 168).

and his brethren did not want to see diversity, and this is why the Jesuits, in spite of good conditions, did not *grosso modo* leave us any really great insights about Nepal. They were so preoccupied with the greatness of their



Brian Houghton Hodgson
1801 - 1894

Brian Houghton Hodgson. Source: Wikipedia.

mission that they were hardly able to notice small Nepal.

Are we any different from Grueber? What do we allow touch us? How do we leave our disciplinary rigidity behind us and approach the completely 'other' without being knocked out by a punch from beneath? That is a difficult question which clever minds have already tried to tackle. In the meantime, let us return to Nepal, far away from (and yet in the middle of) these academic debates.

The relatively friendly reception of the Jesuits and Capuchins came to an end by time of the king of Gorkhā, Pṛthvī Nārāyaṇa Śāha, who conquered the Kathmandu Valley and founded today's Nepal. Pṛthvī didn't want any foreigners. Consequently, in 1769 the last monks left the country. From 1814 till 1816 a war occurred with the British East India Company. Faced with defeat, Nepal had to tolerate a British resident. That was the first opportunity for non-ecclesiastic foreigners to stay in Nepal for a longer period. Amongst them was Brian Houghton Hodgson (1801–1894) who became resident in 1833.² Hodgson was the first to concern himself with old texts and documents that he gathered.

Hodgson gathered, but he did not hunt. He was, to put it bluntly, not much

2 Hodgson, Brian Houghton (1874): *Essays on the Languages, Literature and Religion of Nepal and Tibet together with further Papers on the Geography, Ethnology and Commerce of those Countries*; London, Trübner and Co. See also: Hunter, William Wilson (1896): *The Life of Brian Houghton Hodgson, British resident at the Court of Nepal*; London, J. Murray; Waterhouse, David (ed.) (2004): *The Origins of Himalayan Studies: Brian Houghton Hodgson in Nepal and Darjeeling 1820–1858*; London, Routledge Curzon; Allen, Charles (2015): *The Prisoner of Kathmandu: Brian Hodgson in Nepal, 1820–43*; London, Haus Publishing Ltd.

better than the Jesuit Grueber. He, too, did not want to be challenged by knowledge. The things he collected did not end up in the academic debating societies, but in the archives of Paris, Cambridge and London – henceforth conserved as knowledge of others, but not as *other* knowledge. But can the knowledge of these manuscripts really challenge us? Can we still think a world that is not defined, or constrained by what Latour calls our three Goddesses: the Goddesses of alleged Objectivity, Efficiency and Profitability?³

That these Goddesses are constructs and do not even comply with their own dictates is well-known. We, too – that is, some colleagues and I – have in a kind of historical fieldwork looked into the objectivity of historiography. The results have been recently published in *History and Theory*.⁴ We asked ourselves how a chronicle⁵ from the early 19th century managed to preserve a world of multiplicity in which different velocities and different places of gods and men stand side by side without being subject to the dictates of the three Goddesses; in which, for instance, the inscriptions recording a temple's foundation have as much historicity as the myth of the drainage of Kathmandu Valley by the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī; or in which there is a simultaneity of the non-simultaneous. So we did not do what is normally done in order to avoid failing because of the epistemological challenge of diversity: namely, to chop up the text in historical and philological strata, and to separate the 'objective' from the mythological or legendary. This way, we did not ascribe another time frame to the authors of this chronicle, nor did we reject them as dialogue partners, nor did we regard the text as exotic or savage thinking. We took the other seriously – and still we were somewhat perplexed.

For what do we do with such other worlds? Are not we the ones who de-

3 Latour, Bruno (2007): 'The Recall of Modernity – Anthropological Approaches'; *Cultural Studies Review*, 13.1, 11–30.

4 Michaels, Axel & Manik Bajracharya & Niels Gutschow & Madeleine Herren & Bernd Schneidmüller & Gerald Schwedler & Astrid Zotter (2016): 'Nepalese History in a European Experience: A Case Study In Transcultural Historiography'; *History and Theory*, 55 (May 2016), 210–232.

5 Michaels, Axel (with Manik Bajracharya and Niels Gutschow) (eds.) (2016): *Nepālikabhūpa-Vaṃśāvalī: History of the Kings of Nepal – A Buddhist Chronicle*; Kathmandu, Himal Books; vol. 1: Manik Bajracharya & Axel Michaels: *Introduction and Translation*; vol. 2: Manik Bajracharya & Axel Michaels, *Edition*; vol. 3: Niels Gutschow, *Maps and Illustrations*.

fine the other? And isn't the assumption of a totally different world false? Of course, this is an absolutely humanistic and therefore, to many minds, superfluous question. In 19th century Nepal one simply did not ask this question. People who came to Nepal were inspired by the idea of belonging to a modernity that had left behind the 'savage thinking' of 'old times' and at best had the mission to verify and archive it. They considered it progressive to allow for pluralism from the distance of a supposedly 'objective' description, albeit without spotting the hidden trapdoor within: the question of the relativity of knowledge. For the dilemma is that if we view our knowledge as better, because given by proof or logic or objectivity, efficiency, and profitability respectively, we are just like the others who also, of course, view their knowledge as given, unless we apply the method of constant examination to our knowledge, too. But who says that the others did not do that as well and still do, and who says that even this method is not questionable? This is the old debate of relativism, as discussed e.g. in the 1982 volume *Reason and Culture: The Universal and the Particular Revisited*, edited by Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes.⁶ It is about nothing less than my two questions, which are also asked there: 'Does the rich and extensive evidence of apparently irrational beliefs require us to accept relativism in any stronger form?' And, 'In identifying beliefs, must we – indeed can we – discriminate between those which are true and rational and those which, in varying ways, are not?' In other words, in my words: 'How socio-cultural or ethnocentric, and thus how relative, is knowledge? Or are there different ways of being?'

Due to the fear that our regime of knowledge may be fragile we collect and archive knowledge to an exorbitant extent – right up to the present day, as an expression, one might say, of a supposedly neutral scientificity and a supposedly universal duty to conserve cultural heritage. Let me just mention the more than 180,000 manuscripts, partially the oldest ones of South Asia, that the Nepal-German Manuscript Preservation Project captured on microfilm – a project of German Research Society and German Oriental Society which I myself was allowed to direct, on site and at a young age, from

6 Hollis, Martin & Steven Lukes (eds.) (1982): *Reason and Culture: The Universal and the Particular Revisited*; Cambridge, MIT Press.



1981 to 1983. Among these films are also over 100,000 paper documents, the analysis of which has been thankfully granted to my colleagues and me – now more advanced in age – in my academy project ‘Sources for the History of Religion and Law of Premodern Nepal’⁷, a task that may, with hard work and some luck, continue until 2028.

So you realise – said in parentheses – that Nepal has not let go of me ever since the first days. One can also just be irritated by Nepal. So please humour me if I today overplay the part of the Nepal lover. Michael Witzel, an Indologist in Harvard and doyen of Indological Nepal research said recently: “Nepal is just in our bones.” Yes, that’s the way it is. And the treasures in the field of rituals or in the belly of the archives have not yet been accessed, not by far. And so Nepal remains a great challenge.

2. Moderato

The challenge of plurality or the „totally different”

But the diversity discovered in Nepal did not just show itself in rituals and texts. No country has such a variety of plants as the country from the sub-tropical Tarai to the arid regions of the highlands and the snow-covered mountain ranges. Of course, the first explorers were not blind to this diversity. On the contrary, they were often philologists and nature researchers in one, bridge scientists who collected butterflies as well as texts. Hodgson, for example, published 127 papers on natural history and discovered 39 new species in flora and fauna like e.g. *Phoenicurus hodgsoni*, vulgo Hodgson’s redstart.



Hodgson’s redstart (Phoenicurus hodgsoni). Drawing: Joseph Wolf, ca. 1853-55

⁷ <http://www.haw.uni-heidelberg.de/forschung/forschungsstellen/nepal/projekt.en.html>, accessed 12 December 2017.

Axel Michaels: Nepal in the World

But in secret there thrived a highly transcultural ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity as well. Nepal knows 123 languages, and according to the constitution of 2015, art. 1.6, all of them are national languages, though Nepālī is the only official language. And there are five language groups: Indo-Aryan, Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Asiatic, Dravidian, and Kusunda, an isolated language in western Nepal that was thoroughly researched only in 2004 and of which there are only seven native speakers left. Linguists dance down the mountains from joy because there are so many things to explore. Anthropologists rub their hands given the more than 125 castes and ethnic groups, among whom are the Sherpas, Rai-Limbus, Magars, Tharus, Newars, Mustangis or Tibetans – just to name some of the bigger demographic groups.

But the earlier scholars faced this diversity quite differently. Some collect-



Hindu initiation in Kathmandu (Photo courtesy: A. Michaels, 1982)

ed knowledge about birds, trees, and rocks, others collected manuscripts, languages, rituals, and cultural knowledge. Whereas with scientific knowledge it was about *discovering* and describing the diversity of species, with cultural knowledge it was about *revealing* the diversity. Is one knowledge just there and is the other one just transmitted under a veil, like handing over the Veda (literally ‘knowledge’) during a Hindu initiation in Nepal?

Why, for example, does mythological knowledge have to be unveiled, demystified or debunked as belief, superstition, or ideology before it can find its way into the canon of academic knowledge? And must the ethno-Indologist set himself up as the defender of such ignorance against the proponents of rational knowledge? Which hierarchies of knowledge are at work here? The old hierarchy of belief, magic, and science? Did we not leave it behind?

Has it not long since been shown that a clear distinction between persons and things, nature and society is obsolete? Must we, should we, still privilege our own epistemology when we study other cultures' representations of what they consider to be the real world? And if we do not, does it mean that we have to start from the premise that there are different realities, worlds, ontologies?

We basically still face epistemological diversity with the greatest distrust, even though there have long been calls for a symmetrical anthropology (Latour) and epistemology. Somehow a certain, Europe-America-centric knowledge always seems to be simply given, almost like a fetish, whether in the shape of an evolutionist rationality or other ontological *aprioris*, or as technological progress given by rationality. The rest of the world only catches up on the advance of knowledge of the west if it adjusts, or acts like the tortoise in the fairy tale: just play a trick and declare, 'I'm already there'. Nowhere does this show itself more clearly than in the reaction to religion, which was *per se* defined as false knowledge or non-science. The Dutch anthropologist Bob Scholte called this 'epistemocide'.⁸ As soon as the call for a *vera religio* was abandoned, the western hares could either let the variety of religions run wild because they did not take them seriously any more, or make it into a question of religious war and peace.

Nepal once again was a special case, since it had an impressive coexistence and confusion of religious furrows that had previously been neatly separated. Expressions like 'syncretism' and 'religious tolerance' were quickly at hand – and thus the totally other was overlooked. Let us again take a closer look at one example: the procession of goddess Vatsalā, to whom I dedicated my first publication on Nepal.⁹ In this *jātrā* Vatsalā, a form of Pārvatī, Śiva's consort, is revered in a nine-day ritual. She is a bloodthirsty goddess who resides at cremation sites and who demanded a temple with-

8 Scholte, Bob (1984): 'Review of Reason and Culture' (cf. note 6); *American Anthropologist*, 86.4, 960–965, p. 965.

9 Michaels, Axel (1984): 'Śiva's Wild and Wayward Calf – The Goddess Vatsalā, her Temple and Yātrā'; *Kailash*, XI.3–4, 105–147; see also id. (1994): *Reisen der Götter – Der nepalische Pashupatinatha-Tempel und sein rituelles Umfeld*, 2 vols.; Bonn, VGH Wissenschaftsverlag; and (2008): *Śiva in Trouble – Festivals and Rituals at the Paśupatinātha Temple of Deopatan (Nepal)*; Oxford, Oxford University Press.

out doors, since she likes the smell of corpses.

This temple is situated underneath the Paśupatinātha temple, the Hindu national sacred site of Nepal. At the climax of her festival, wild Vatsalā is offered blood sacrifices, even – according to legend – human sacrifices, and she is soaked in rice beer in which her devotees shower in the early morning.



The procession of goddess Vatsalā (Photo courtesy: A. Michaels, 1984)

Of course, Śiva, the god of pure, vegetarian Hindus, has to reject Vatsalā. As a sign of his contempt he closes the doors to his temple. The goddess then threatens to abandon the city. A typical marital strife. On the third day Śiva, represented by his main priest, remorsefully calls her back, and the processional car, which has been covered with flowers and fabric, is brought in a victory parade through the city to Paśupatinātha temple, where the priest gives her a piece of red cloth, a kind of sari, as a sign of reconciliation. Vatsalā then foregoes blood sacrifices for one year. The festival, as I wrote at that time, reveals a conflict between two irreconcilable forms of Hinduism: the pure, vegetarian Hinduism of the great, Indian Smārta tradition on the one hand, and the small, local tantric tradition on the other. But this is not an intra- or even interreligious conflict. There is nothing to be separated in what, for the Nepalis, in any case forms a unity. Tolerance implies that one acknowledges the other as other, as the Indologist Paul Hacker argued in his study of inclusivism. But if the ‘other’ has always been viewed as one’s own or has been assimilated, then neither the question of tolerance nor that of otherness poses itself.

Religious identities are thus connected to exclusions, which in their turn only produce diversity. And these exclusions are connected to a certain form of analytic thinking that is aimed at dividing and ruling, and is at the root of our whole system of knowledge. And they come with a certain kind of

‘othering’, one could also say, even though it has fallen into disrepute. But to this I answer with the Argentinian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro: “[...] why should ‘saming’ be such a better thing to do to others? Who wants to be samed?”¹⁰ My answer is: the Nepalis or Hindus do, precisely in terms of the identificatory habitus that I have elsewhere discussed as an essential characteristic of Hinduism, and which depends not on separation, but identification.¹¹

Things that can, as Roberto Calasso says,¹² “neither be proved nor disproved” but “only experienced” – the unity of thinking, hidden things that the gods love (as in the Aitareya-Upaniṣad) – in such things lies India’s and Nepal’s great otherness. It can therefore certainly happen that in Nepal, to the question ‘Are you Hindu or Buddhist’ one gets the answer ‘Yes!’ Why, if we are Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, do we not also answer with ‘Yes’? Maybe we will get there one day. Here the Nepali can gloat: ‘I’m already there.’ This is what I meant when I said ‘take the other seriously’. This is not to be understood as an essentialization, because it does not mean that the other is for instance only to be found in Nepal or Asia. Rather, it needs to be understood what, in each case, is seen as the ‘other’. The other lies in Asia just as much as it lies in Europe. But we have to face this challenge of relational plurality even though it might hurt, because it means a fundamental insecurity and fragility.

For it seems that we can neither explain nor bear the confusing diversity of the world and therefore we always seek stability in unstable and fragile surroundings. But exactly that is our task. It may ultimately provide, not final security, but at least special research areas and clusters of excellence. Our insecurity is our capital and certainly a job creation scheme. By ‘us’ I mean we scholars of the other or the other-scholars who persistently elude the saming of conventional scientific understanding. It does not help to flee,

10 de Castro, Viveiros (2015): ‘AND’; in: de Castro, Viveiros: *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds*; Chicago, Hau Books.

11 Michaels, Axel (2016): *Der Hinduismus – Geschichte und Gegenwart*; 3rd ed., München, C.H. Beck (engl. transl. (2004) *Hinduism – Past and Present*; Princeton, Princeton University Press).

12 Calasso, Roberto (2013): *Ardor*; London, Allen Lane, p. 121.

as did Goethe who, in a letter to Friedrich Schlegel in 1824, complained that India had become too 'shapeless and diffuse', and turned away. It is up to us instead to discover as well as reveal what is in fact 'other' without being 'totally other', since the other always stands in relation to the self. I now want to demonstrate this relationality with examples which are about fragility and stability – now that these ideas are somehow around – in intertwined relationships. First, two examples of the purported strengthening of instabilities: migrant workers and tourism. After that, three examples for the alleged creation of stability: the Gurkha regiments, the law, and ritual. I might have taken epistemologically more relevant examples like the *karma* system or *nirvāṇa* but this lecture's topic is Nepal in the world, which I take to mean our shared world.

3. Molto furioso e lamentoso

Within or without – Nepal's migrant workers

Nepal does not lie only in Nepal, nor does Asia lie only in Asia nor Europe only in Europe. We know this at least since the cluster of excellence 'Asia and Europe in a Global Context'. There has long been a ubiquitous Nepal that oscillates between Shangri La and failed State. But my story is about Nepalis outside of Nepal understood in a purely geographical sense: migrant workers in the gulf region, first and foremost in Saudi Arabia and Qatar as well as other countries, especially in India and Malaysia. Every year more than 600,000 young Nepalis leave the country, are torn from their social and cultural environment, and return with new values. By now every third household has a member working abroad. The foreign currency thus earned has become Nepal's biggest source of income next to tourism. The per capita income in Nepal, however, is only 751 US\$, and 57% of the population earn only 2 \$ per day. Germany's per capita income, on the other hand, is 33,354 US\$. Can we grasp such asymmetries apart from all questions about right knowledge? Can we comprehend what it means to toil under subhuman conditions in Qatar for the stadiums of the next-but-one football world cup

Axel Michaels: Nepal in the World

and in some cases to lose one's life?

My first field research in Nepal concerned the context of the Paśupatinātha temple, where cremation sites are also located. The public cremation of corpses shocked me, but when I saw the first cheap wooden and tin coffins in which deceased migrant workers were sent back, my heart sank. There were 188 of them in 2014, i.e. one every second day; the World Trade Organization (ITUC) expects that altogether more than 4000 workers will die in the course of world cup construction projects. These days, when I wait in line at the airport next to migrant workers, I always think to myself, "who will come back home safe and sound, and who in a coffin?" The Nepali artist Hitman Gurung has captured this pain in his moving series "I have to feed myself, my family and my country" (see p. 14).



Dogs bask in the heat on a cremation site at Paśupatinātha temple (Photo courtesy: A. Michaels, 1982)



Hitman Gurung, "Mom has a tragic story", 2016 (Photo courtesy: Christiane Brosius)

At some point I always think about how capitalism eats its children. But migrant labour alone is not the problem. And migrant labour is not a modern phenomenon brought by capitalism. In Nepal, many groups in society basically have been and are on the move in order to earn something for their families – as mercenaries, as semi-nomads from the high mountains into the valleys, as merchants between India and China, as security personnel in India, or as pilgrims or monks. The fear of migrant workers only emerged along with the idea of being sedentary as a precondition of modern rule and the national state, as has been correctly shown by Foucault¹³. Permanent residence that must always be proven for the sake of order, is therefore not the origin of the right to freedom, but rather a limitation on it. And it is the beginning of viewing migration as a special case and condemning it. Nevertheless, migration is extremely common. Nowadays we are inevitably connected to the ‘poor creatures’ of this world, partially via outrageous economic asymmetries. Our wealth often still grows on their oppressed backs. May all the bigmouths in the world choke on footballs if they cannot see this. And they should finally draw the consequence, and organize labour migration humanely, both here and there. Hermann Bujard has quite rightly pointed out in a recent research magazine *Ruperto Carola* that there is an “appalling disregard of certain world regions” and that the reactions to such migratory movements, at the beginning of which we now stand, are “short-sighted and totally insufficient”.¹⁴ There is an entire Hima-
laya of research questions here that can only be properly faced if migrations between disciplines can also be accepted. It is time to reciprocally assimilate refugees from the disciplines.

13 Foucault, Michel (1977), *Discipline and Punish*; New York, Vintage, 1977, p. 106.

14 Bujard, Herrmann & Hans Gebhardt (2016): ‘Das böse Erbe der Kolonialzeit. Flucht auf die Wohlstandsinseln’, interview; *Ruperto Carola*, 8 ‘Nord & Süd’, 7–15; p. 9.



4. *Desolato*

Uphill-downhill-uphill – Nepal's tourism

The opening of Nepal, inevitable in the course of globalisation, has brought new fragilities. When the migrant workers return from the hot skyscrapers of Doha into their cold huts, they are – we think – uprooted. In fact, some of them struggle with this, and wish neither to stay nor to go back. But their future is just like ours. In times of globalisation the classical definitions of space lose relevance, and the stabilities based upon them begin to unravel. Transnational and transregional spaces emerge, for which other, new criteria of order are effective, and transculturalities emerge for which analytical tools have yet to be developed.

Tourism, both a symptom and a driving force of globalisation, shows that these tools are not yet at hand. And as is well-known, Nepal is a very popular destination for tourists because of its unique natural and cultural landscape as well as its national parks (20% of its area is under protection). It is known that traveling connects, even transforms, and that tourism is one of the great motors of transculturality. And yet the relations and effects are insufficiently explored. For too long, academic interest in tourism was viewed as scientifically dubious because of its connotations of spare time and leisure. Hans Magnus Enzensberger's great essay 'Theory of Tourism'¹⁵ is an exception, as are different theories of travel. These notwithstanding, tourism has so far almost exclusively been analyzed from the viewpoint of scholars' respective disciplines, even in tourism studies programmes. There is no commonly accepted referential frame through which the knowledge can be transferred into a theoretical context. Therefore, engagement with tourism has until now almost always been from particular disciplinary perspectives. Thus sociology analyzes travel behaviour, geography records the spatial relevance of tourism and economics engages with supply and demand of touristic products, etc. One seeks to apply the results with sustainability as the

15 Enzensberger, Hans Magnus (1958): *Vergebliche Brandung der Ferne. Eine Theorie des Tourismus*; Merkur, 12, 701–720.

most important goal. This is all very well. But much more needs to be taken into account, e.g., questions of longevity, of cultural compatibility, of social fragilities and stabilities, for example ecological sustainability. Psychology, economics, geography, sociology, anthropology, and political science need to join forces here with regional disciplines like Indology. For tourism is more than travel, it is a roller coaster – with many aporias. In the course of his quest for untouched nature, the tourist – that is, all of us – touches it and not seldom leaves it littered, like for example on the Himalayan treks or at Mount Everest. The tourist wants authenticity but turns away when the native population reshapes its cultural heritage in a way it finds authentic but the westerner does not, for example by installing neon lights in the old pagoda temples. The tourist seeks the old traditions and rituals but is frightened when blood flows in the temple or in front of a Hindu house, since in Nepal animals are slaughtered, for example at the Dasain festival. The tourist wants to be there and to have the totally ‘other’, and yet somehow everything should be just like at home. The tourist wants the ‘other’ but please - not too much! Thus, the tourist is the perfect expression of the present: he flees from the unpleasant world that he himself has created, finds recreation and recreates himself in the finding, he does not pass the stress test that he himself has created because he is the other that he seeks. I had best stop here before getting too sarcastic, but I nevertheless wish all of you a nice holiday.

5. Marziale

Quest for consistency – the army, the law, and ritual

People always look for ways to achieve consistency, even in Nepal. Three means are preferred: the army, the law, and the ritual.

As for the army: Nepal has been regarded and is partly still regarded as a peaceful land. But there have been many political instabilities in its recent history where the army was not uninvolved. Take, for instance, the ten

year-long insurrection of the so-called Maoists against the monarchy from 1996 to 2006, and its brutal suppression by government troops: this civil war claimed more than 12,000 victims. During the Śāha dynasty from 1768 to 1951, as well, the army could not really provide law and order. The kings were mostly too weak, too crazy, or too young to be able to properly rule the country. Six of the seven kings between 1777 and 1950 were between two and six years old at the time of their enthronement, and the last child king was the present retired king, Gyānendra, who was three years old at his coronation.

One consequence was furious fights or even massacres among the regents: the queens, the queen mothers and prime ministers. In 1864, the vigorous general Jaṅga Bahādura Rāṅā almost obliterated the entire ruling elite, and on 1 June 2001 the crown prince killed his parents, siblings and other relatives – which didn't prevent him from becoming king for three days while in a coma. There has not been such a blood bath in any royal family since Lenin exiled the Romanovs.

History has long since laughed at the reputation that still sticks to Nepal, of being a peaceful country. Nevertheless, king Birendra declared his country a stable zone of peace in 1975:

As it is one of the most ancient civilizations in Asia, our natural concern is to preserve our independence, a legacy handed down by history. We need peace for our security, independence and for development. And if today, peace is an overriding concern for us, it is only because our people genuinely desire peace in the country, in our region and elsewhere in the world. It is with this earnest desire to institutionalize peace that I stand to make a proposition – a proposition that my country, Nepal, be declared a Zone of Peace. As heirs to a country that has always lived in independence, we wish to see that our freedom and independence shall not be thwarted by the changing flux of time, when understanding is replaced by misunderstanding, when conciliation is replaced by belligerency and war.

Those were great words, and in fact 130 nations consequently acknowledged Nepal as a zone of peace. But the attempt to cover up the seething



Axel Michaels: Nepal in the World

ethnic, social and political diversity under the cloak of a zone of peace and thus obtain consistency, or more specifically to circumvent the “changing flux of time” was fraudulent.

Paradoxically it was the army that contributed to the reputation of a stable, peaceful Nepal. In the so-called Treaty of Sagauli (1816) an army of mercenaries was wrested from Nepal. This was the hour of birth of the notorious Gurkha regiments who became known as combative warriors, loyal unto death. The Gurkhas fought in the Sepoy insurgency in 1857 against the Indians, in Afghanistan, in the boxer insurgency in China, in the Second World



Coronation of King Gyānendra Bīr Bikram Śāha (1950 and 2001). Photo courtesy: Axel Michaels

War against the Germans, in Kosovo and now in Syria. Tens of thousands lost their lives. In the Falkland War the Argentinians are said to have dropped their weapons when they saw the Gurkhas coming over the hills with their Khukuri daggers. Sir Ralph Lilley Turner (1888-1983), known to many of you as the great linguist and author of several dictionaries of Indo-Aryan lan-



Gurkha monument in Whitehall, London (source: Wikipedia)

guages, who served in the First World War with the 3rd Queen Alexandra's Own Gurkha Rifles, saluted the Gurkhas: "Bravest of the brave, most generous of the generous, never had country more faithful friends than you." The inscription was unveiled in Whitehall in 1997.

That sounds good, but it is founded on racist-orientalist ideas. A relational view looks different. Because the British considered the Gurkhas to be barbarian and brazen until about 1816. Only later did they develop a theory of martial races in the Anglo-Nepalese War, after which the Gurkhas become their loyal allies. This theory was in turn nothing more than a variation on the indigenous brahmanic ideology of rank or *varṇa*.¹⁶ In that way the brahmanic Indians, seen as feminine, effeminate and submissive, could be played off against the Gurkhas, being manly-loyal and thereby equal to the Europeans. The other was not a given here but had to be discovered, which the British did in an indirect way. A century later an epistemological reflection of this racist relation of masculinity and femininity, foreshadowing the 20th century catastrophe, goes like this:

For those trekking southwest, the separation of Indian from Iranian was the renunciation or the last step to renunciation of participation in the great contest of peoples, in which the healthy masculinity of the western nations has matured. In the sumptuous tranquility of their new home country those Aryans, the brothers of the most noble nations of Europe, mixing with the dark native population of India, have adopted more and more the characteristics of Hinduness, slackened by a climate to which their type, shaped in a moderate zone, was not able to adapt

¹⁶ Montgomery, Carina (1998): *The Gurkhas and Colonial Knowledge: Habitat, Masculinity and the Making of a 'Martial Race', c. 1760–1820*; PhD thesis, University of Calgary.

Axel Michaels: Nepal in the World

without severe harm, and slackened also through the idle indulgence which the rich land offered them after an easy victory over unequal enemies, resilient savages, and slackened also through a life which lacked the great tasks, the steeling suffering, the strong and hard imperative.¹⁷

One can see how it looks when such an un-“slackened” army is created, when thousands of young Nepalis come for recruitment in order to learn “the steeling suffering, the strong and hard imperative” but only barely 200 of them succeed. First height, age, hairstyle etc. are assessed. Then they struggle through the test and in the end, stand in their underpants before the British and Nepali officers, a mere number written on their upper body, where they learn if they made it or not.¹⁸

The total disciplining of the various domains of life carried out in such recruiting exercises is – and this is the important thing – mainly of a conceptual nature.

Because it is based on the idea that the ethnic, religious and social diversity of Nepal is reduced or ignored in favour of an imagined consistency. And – sorry for the following ‘mental hiccups’ – since disciplining is also connected to disciplinarity, could it be that we are acting similarly in our disciplines? Do we not also at times ignore diversity and complexity in order to keep the shop open, to keep life running? But, my anarchical *alter ego* asks, ‘Why?’

A second way to bring order and stability to a diverse and turbulent, but in no way fragile country, is the law. In particular, the 19th century brought laws and ordinances to Nepal because a nation state needed to be formed, meaning that schools, hospitals, land registry offices, revenue offices, police or post offices needed to be established. Jaṅga Bahādura Rāṅā even tried in his first constitution, the *Mulukī Ain* of 1854, to create a kind of equality before the law. His model was the *Code Napoleon* which he had seen in Paris. But he did not succeed in the dissolution of the hierarchical caste society. Even regulative knowledge cannot overcome diversity: like the military, it is

17 Oldenberg, Hermann (1917): *Religion des Veda*; 2nd ed., Stuttgart, J.G. Cotta’sche Buchhandlung Nachf.; p. 2.

18 Cf. the documentary “Who will be a Gurkha” by Kesang Tseten (2012), Shunyata Film Productions.



based on a rather selective, because pragmatically oriented, epistemology. This important and fascinating text from the middle of the 19th century still awaits its critical edition and translation – a task I will address, now with my orderly ego – with the help of the beneficent money of the Lautenschläger prize.

A third method for creating consistency is ritual, in which the question of meaning is mostly muted. Together with Niels Gutschow, who has been my co-author since my first professional days in Nepal, I was lucky enough to be able to thoroughly analyze rites de passage in the Collaborative Research Programme (SFB) 'Ritual Dynamics'.¹⁹ No matter whether Newari Hindus or Buddhists are initiated, married or perform the funeral rites, their actions are very often similar, right up to the most minute details, as e.g. in the Seven Steps (*saptapadī*) in the Buddhist initiation or the Hindu marriage. Of course, we had to interpret this – contrary to the information given by the local people involved – as a further proof of the meaninglessness of the rituals, or at least of the hypothesis that the variety of attributions of meaning suggests that the actions themselves do not have only one meaning, and that religions do not live on the question of meaning alone. This hypothesis – first proffered by Frits Staal and then modified by Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw – is as easy as it is tough to accept, which is why I have at last slightly modified it in my book *Homo Ritualis*²⁰: rituals are without meaning, but this fact itself is not without meaning. This means that the *homo ritualis* likes to seek situations in which the questions of meaning are not asked and in which they may hardly be asked because the continuity or stability of tradition cannot be questioned, since one has to have a footing. However, this only works for a while. Eventually someone comes and shouts: "Unter den Talaren der Muff von tausend Jahren".²¹ And all tradition, all footing is lost.

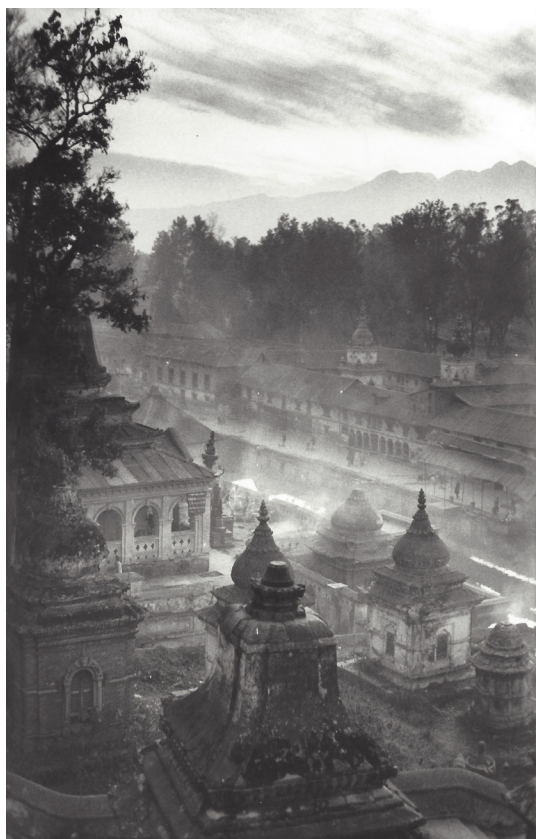
19 Gutschow, Niels & Axel Michaels (2005): *Handling Death. The Dynamics of Death and Ancestor Rituals among the Newars of Bhaktapur, Nepal*, vol. 1; (2008): *Growing up. Hindu and Buddhist Initiation Rituals among Newar Children in Bhaktapur, Nepal*, vol. 2; (2012): *Getting Married – Hindu and Buddhist Marriage Rituals among Newars of Bhaktapur and Patan, Nepal*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag.

20 Michaels, Axel (2016): *Homo Ritualis. Hindu Rituals and Its Significance for Ritual Theory*; Oxford, Oxford University Press.

21 Literally, "Under the academic gown is the stink of a millennium". Slogan of the student protests starting in 1968 at many German universities.

6. *Grave e scherzando*

Farewell glances from the roof of the world



What do we learn from these stories about small Nepal? We learn that the small is always only relatively small, depending on one's perspective; the small can also indicate an abundance and entanglement, the greatness of which look almost like a threat or at least forms an epistemological challenge. And we learn that, as Latour also says, we need to abandon a monocausality that wishes to substitute multiculturalism and transculturalism with monocultures. Let me reiterate: a thoroughly relational approach in the social and cultural sciences is needed which discovers as well as unveils the small without exoticising it as the 'totally

other'. On a large as well as on a small scale.

But what does smallness mean for the academic life? I began by studying Law, a notoriously vast discipline, and then switched to Indology, a small discipline for a great country, and once again I specialised on small Nepal, and moreover on a Nepali minority; the Newars. And yet, from these small worlds totally different worlds open up, indeed mesocosms,²² since the gods dwell amongst the humans. And it is like this with the smaller subjects which are best kept small. Protect them, for they preserve great things! Protect them, not like orchids (they are long since imported

22 See Levy, Robert (1990): *Mesocosm - Hinduism and the Organization of a Traditional Newar City in Nepal*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

from great countries), but like shrinking violets by the wayside between the great, global powers, forces, and disciplines of which they are a part. In these days, our greatest challenges are always mentioned as something which also the humanities should face. But maybe the academic species protection of rare, supposedly small disciplines and fields of research which do not at once succumb to the postulate of utility and exploitability, is a similarly great challenge. Even in a recent call by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research for proposals in small disciplines this demon appeared, no doubt sent by the three goddesses. It asks for „potential for applicability or increase in visibility, societal relevance and connectivity“. What an intellectual pauperisation! Who other than us should prescribe what we want to know and what is relevant? Although, “increase of visibility” somehow fits with Nepal – I will return to this shortly.

But let me first summarize: I have talked about regimes of knowledge and the epistemological challenge of cultural plurality and plurality of knowledge under the influence of fragilities as well as the quest for consistency. I have talked about missionaries, travelling scholars, mercenaries, labour migrants, and tourists. An entangled world became visible. But in this world, some people and parties wish to close the borders once again. Viewed from Nepal’s perspective this seems downright outrageous. Viewed from Nepal even Europe seems culturally poor. We have heard it: 123 languages and nearly as many peoples or ethnic groups with great or small religions. Everything on a territory barely larger than Greece. Everything on a territory that is time and again plagued by severe natural catastrophes. And above all, everything mostly peaceful and tolerant in spite of some violence. No, please allow me this declaration of love in the end: this small country with its very lovable people is not small, it is quite great, it is even sometimes an example for the fact that multiculturalism is livable and fruitful. This deserves awe and respect, and I am glad that in 1971 the spirit of adventure brought me to the place where I also want to do research in the future.



Axel Michaels: Nepal in the World



Detmold, 25 February 1971

But when I look back half wistfully and half relieved at my work in this university I also have to say: many things that seemed to bear a deeper significance at the time turned out to be only jokes, satire, or irony. I have also learned from Nepal to not always take things too seriously. Viewed from there, the roof of the world, there is an increase of visibility that makes many things look quite small. When I heard there of the things that are so exciting and important here, I sometimes had to smile like a Buddha. But I myself have always descended into the valleys and the lowlands again. So I take this farewell lecture also as an inaugural lecture for the endeavour to practice being myself even more, in serene equanimity in and with Nepal.

Ladies and gentlemen, now that I am almost finished it would be the time to thank all those at this university who have done me so much good in the last twenty years. Please excuse me for not doing that. I am extremely grateful to my family, first and foremost Christiane and the children, my friends and colleagues at the university, especially in my faculty, the students, the South Asia Institute, the Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe”, the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and other institutions. But they would be too many if I were to name each of them separately, and above all it would move me too deeply, and I would become very fragile.

Axel Michaels: Nepal in the World



So I will just say: A hearty thanks to all of you, and see you soon, ideally now in the Bel Étage for an Apéro. And to the students, who are explicitly and cordially invited, I say, “See you next week for the test, once again in lecture room 5.”



Axel Michaels is Professor Emeritus of Classical Indology at the South Asia Institute, Heidelberg. Author of a large amount of monographs and articles, Michaels research focus is the study of ritual, society, and religious culture of the Indian subcontinent, in particular Nepal. His major publications include *Der Hinduismus: Geschichte und Gegenwart* (2006) and most recently, *Homo ritualis* (2016). Axel Michaels has greatly contribu-

ted to academic life at Heidelberg University and set going many projects and research agendas. He was Speaker of the collaborative research area (SFB 619) on Ritual Dynamics (2002-13) and Director of the Heidelberg Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe" (since 2007). Professor Michaels received the prestigious Lautenschläger award in 2016 and presently leads a project funded by the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences on "Documents on the History of Religion and Law in pre-modern Nepal".