Debating Development in South Asia: 
Revisiting Dor Bahadur Bista’s Fatalism and Development 25 Years Later

One-day International Workshop 
Co-organized by the Department of Sociology, South Asian University; Department of Anthropology at Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu and Martin Chautari, Kathmandu

29 December 2016

Concept Note

The issue of “development” has been at the core of South Asian academic and public policy debate for many decades. The rise of Narendra Modi, who popularized the slogan of development in the 2014 general elections in India, can be understood as a case of new urgency that the idea of development has taken on in South Asia in recent years. Despite the upsurge of ethnic and identity politics in Nepal, development has always been at the center of public debate. As much as policy makers, politicians, and scholars want development, it has, however, remained as elusive as ever. The proposed workshop aims at unravelling the riddle of development in Nepal and beyond through the work of a prominent Nepali anthropologist.

In Nepal, Nepali Anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista’s Fatalism and Development has influenced generations of students and scholars. Over the past decades since its publication in 1991, the book has seen several reprints and it is quoted and cited more than any publications authored by any social scientist working in Nepal. Cambridge anthropologist Alan Macfarlane has compared the book with Western classics such as Tocqueville’s Ancient Regime and Weber’s Protestant Ethics.

In the book, Bista, who mysteriously disappeared from Western Nepal in 1995, has linked Nepal’s failure to modernize and develop to its caste system and the domination of the state by the “fatalistic” high caste elites. While Bista advances an interesting and seemingly plausible hypothesis, the book also raises some interesting questions, which has been rarely discussed in scholarly debate. For one, it has been shown that societal “values” as such may or may not directly interfere in the process of development. Second, Nepal has seen strong leftist and “progressive” movements since 1950. These movements are usually led by high-caste elite leaders. These movements and the political changes seem to speak against Bista’s fatalism thesis. It is thus important to investigate the nature and consequences of fatalism for development in Nepal. The findings and conclusions of the workshop will be important not only for Nepal but also for the rest of South Asia in general.

This one-day workshop will be the first in Debating Development in South Asia Series. This year, the workshop will primarily focus on Nepal. In the subsequent years, we plan to focus on the comparative experience of South Asia.

This event will also be an opportunity for South Asian University to show its commitment to scholarship in South Asia.
The Plan:

Martin Chautari (MC), a prominent Kathmandu-based academic NGO and the Central Department of Anthropology (CDA) at Tribhuvan University will be the co-conveners of the workshop.

Four Themes have been tentatively identified:
- Religion, Fatalism and Development
- Fatalism and Development in the History of DB Bista’s works
- Reception of Fatalism and Development by Academicians and Activists
- Significance of Fatalism and Development for Nepal and South Asia

Eight to ten distinguished scholars from Nepal and abroad will be invited to present their papers at the workshop. All presenters will submit their first draft of paper by November 1 and each presenter will read all the draft papers as well as comment on at least two papers. The presenters then submit a revised version of the paper at the workshop. At the workshop, each presenter will be assigned a distinguished scholar as a commentator on the paper.

Publication Plan:
Selected papers will be published in Studies in Nepali History and Society (SINHAS), a prominent interdisciplinary journal from Kathmandu, Nepal.

Location:
The proposed workshop will take place at Tribhuvan University/Martin Chautari in Kathmandu.

Dates (Tentative):
- Abstract Submission: 15 August 2016
- Full draft paper Submission: 01 November 2016
- Presenters’ peer comments: 30 November 2016
- Dates of the conference: 29 December 2016
- Post-conference submission of revised papers for publication: 30 January 2017
- Peer review reports on revised submission: 15 February 2017
- Manuscript submission for publication: 15 March 2017

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Please contact the logistic secretariat for travel/transportation, lodging, and visa support for international participants.