

# Rethinking Knowledge Production and Exchange: Perspectives from Nepal

*Can we de-centre research exercise, knowledge production and exchange from core areas to the wider community? **Uma Pradhan, Nimesh Dhungana, Sara Parker, Janak Rai, Kumud Rana and Sohan Prasad Sha** discuss how academic research on Nepal — whether by those based in the country or coming from outside — remains focused on core centres for a variety of institutional and structural reasons, and give examples of how this can be overcome to attempt a more widely-anchored knowledge-gathering and dissemination exercise.*

How can we critically (re)-think the politics of knowledge production and dissemination? This blogpost seeks to continue the ongoing conversation on Nepal as a contested site of knowledge production ([Des Chene 2007](#)). We reflect on the existing hierarchies and challenges within the social science research environment in Nepal, together with some innovative epistemological and methodological works led by Sohan Sha, Janak Rai and Sara Parker as well as knowledge-exchange initiatives pursued through the [Nepal Conversations](#) podcast (co-hosted by Nimesh Dhungana, Uma Pradhan and Kumud Rana). We discuss three possible shifts in the way we think about and approach research, and thereby expand the avenues of knowledge production and knowledge exchange in and on Nepal, exploring ways in which particular social and political contexts may pose challenges in negotiating spaces for Nepal-based research within South Asian scholarship, thereby also reflecting on decolonising and democratising social science research in and on Nepal.

## **Challenging Geographical and Class Hierarchies in Knowledge Production**

Academic research is ridden with [hierarchies of knowledge production](#). Is it possible to centre the knowledge produced from a place of marginality and push class, caste and geographical boundaries that limit the research processes and outcomes? Challenging these hierarchies in academic practices, the [‘Barefoot Researcher’ initiative](#) led by Sohan Sha attempts to democratise research and re-think it as something that could be led by people whose lives and experiences are closer to the contexts. Drawing on [Arjun Appudurai](#)’s (2006) idea of the right to research, barefoot researchers not only question Kathmandu-centred research practice but also locate multiplicity in the knowledge production process. The initiative is, thus, building grassroots researchers’ skills to do competent research (Veena Das, ‘Sociological Research in India: The State of Crisis’, 1993); in doing so, it is addressing what [Deshpande](#) (2002: 3628) calls a ‘major crisis in South Asian social science research capacity’ by contributing to and democratising the production of researchers. Similarly, Sara Parker is part of the [Dignity without Danger](#) project that brings together academic and activist knowledge in the same frame. In both these approaches, the idea is to locate knowledge production in [everyday experiences and activism](#). Despite limited research infrastructure, mentorship, and institutional support, they aim to engage with these contradictions and centre the stories and narratives of those who are usually the objects of research.

## **Understanding Research as a Product of Sociality**

There is a critical need to focus on and understand how knowledge production and exchange are shaped by professional–personal circumstances, institutional–structural barriers and constraints in global North–South relations. Yet there is very little attention paid to the social lives and circumstances of academics, especially in the context of Nepal. These professional and structural constraints led Janak Rai to explore ‘fursad’ ethnography — i.e., ethnography done during one’s free time — and reflect on the political economy of knowledge production and the politics of time in the generation of academic knowledge. He explores how research and knowledge production processes rely heavily on the (free) time of the researcher, as well as research interlocutors. ‘Fursad’ ethnography, like ‘barefoot research’, also resists structural constraints which has led to limited opportunities for intellectual debates outside Kathmandu, such as the deteriorated state of humanities and social science research outside Kathmandu and a weakening of intellectual democracy in regional campuses, unequal access to knowledge resources, limited scope for training and mentorship of students, and lack of funding to support research (Martin Chautari 2022). This has become even more challenging for social sciences and humanities given the recent pandemic. Likewise, Parker’s research [collaboration](#), its maintenance and sustainability are always challenged by a lack of sustained funding from international funding bodies, making Nepal-based researchers face constant uncertainty and precarity. These processes highlight researchers’ need to exercise ‘frugality’ that stems from structural and institutional constraints; they also demand that Nepal-based researchers rely on pre-existing networks to conduct research in order to overcome these limitations. This leads to a crucial question: if researchers are always working with constrained resources and other forms of precarity, how can we expect a shift in the way knowledge production is imagined and pursued in Nepal?

### ***Questioning Academic Dismissal of ‘Non-academic’, Local and Activist Knowledge***

The hierarchies of knowledge production also tend to place different kinds of knowledge in silos, and view academic research as separate from knowledge generated in non-University spaces. There is a constant dismissal of ‘non-academic’, local and activist knowledge, especially within academia. Challenging these ideas and practices, Parker’s work celebrates activist stories; Sha’s ‘barefoot researchers’ draw on their own subjective experiences and of others around them; and Rai’s interlocutors share their free time to generate knowledge via multiple methods. These processes question the conditions that privilege certain types of scientific knowledge and problematise the echo chambers of academic knowledge.

It is within this context that the [Nepal Conversations](#) podcast aims to question mainstream approaches to knowledge production, while exploring alternative spaces for academic knowledge through conversations with researchers based in or working on Nepal. Furthermore, as shown by Parker’s project, these spaces could include photo exhibitions, films and social media such as [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). These could also come together in the form of stories of activism as seen in Sha’s ‘barefoot research’ initiative. And these spaces for academic knowledge could be generated during ‘fursad’, taking the form of personalised narratives in Rai’s research fieldwork or during the production of podcast episodes (as in the case of Nepal Conversations). Despite these new spaces for exploring knowledge production, we are still working within the constraints of English as the language of academic communication. Hence researchers, especially in Nepal, are often required to put in much more effort for visibility and recognition.

There is an urgency to diversify and rethink both the content of academic knowledge and the process of its production and dissemination. The examples discussed above are far from exhaustive, rather they are indicative of only some ongoing challenges, and the creative practices toward shifting the way we think about and approach social science research in Nepal. Jointly, these newer forms of epistemological and methodological approaches seek to centre the production of knowledge from the place of marginality and challenge structural hierarchies of knowledge production, both within and outside Nepal. Drawing attention to the ways in which Nepal researchers are expanding the ways in which academic knowledge is produced or disseminated, this blogpost also aims to contribute to current debates about the possibilities to democratise social science research on Nepal, and highlight Nepal as a contextually unique and contested site of knowledge production.

**Note:** This blogpost draws on a hybrid (online-onsite) panel discussion at the Britain-Nepal Academic Council Study Days, Oxford, 13 April 2022.

*The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the 'South Asia @ LSE' blog, the LSE South Asia Centre or the London School of Economics and Political Science.*

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