

What brings the road and what does the road bring? Local governance, subjectivity and cultural politics in ‘post-conflict’ Nepal

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Roads convey a powerful affect in Nepal’s mountain regions. Everyone wants a road; everyone connects palpably to the project of road building; in the mountainous, deforested terrain of the middle Hills and Himalayas, roads flood, crack, erode, collapse, lose passenger buses off sharp, precipitous corners ...yet they perennially hold out the promise of modernization and development for all. Road building commands the largest share of local development budgets during a period of massive decentralization of planning authority. They constitute a key terrain of donor intervention, political party mobilization, and claims making among a politically conscious peasantry. Thus it is no surprise to find road building among the most contested and contentious terrains of local governance.

This paper identifies key themes arising from a study of road building in two mountain districts of Nepal, Khotang and Mugu, whose district centres are currently in the process of being connected to the country’s national road network. Themes include the civilian-military interface that comes into view through the army’s lead role in building the Karnali Highway in Mugu; the politics of decentralization in a ‘post-conflict’ condition; the co-constitution of politics and economy evident in the contract system, the formation of labor markets and the organization of vehicular transport; and the multiple subjectivities and contradictory cultural politics that come together in these conjunctures to shape opportunity and processes of social transformation. Based on these themes, the paper proposes an approach to researching ‘what brings the road and what does the road bring’ to Nepal’s mountain communities.