

Editors' Preface

The volume at hand is the outcome of the conference “Studying Documents in Pre-Modern South Asia and Beyond: Problems and Perspective”, held from 4 to 6 October 2015 in Heidelberg and organised by the research unit *Documents on the History of Religion and Law of Premodern Nepal* of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities.¹ Our aim was to bring together experts in the field of documentary cultures in South Asia and beyond in order to rethink the textual category of documents and to contemplate on its place in interdisciplinary research on South Asia.

Despite their temporal and spatial differences, the contributions assembled in this volume are interconnected by a wide range of common themes and questions (see introduction). In the book they have been arranged around major subjects, the first of which forms diplomatics and the formal features of documents and deeds. The first piece is by T. Lubin, who presents a bird’s eye view of the formation of an Indic diplomatic tradition. G. Vogeler chooses an even wider angle when he explores the possibilities of digital methods in developing a global framework for the discipline of diplomatics. In contrast, C. Ramble presents a local case study from 19th to 20th century Mustang, where a local diplomatic culture drew on Tibetan, Nepali and maybe even British idioms and practices.

The next three articles deal with questions of documentary practices and the formation of cultural memory. Y. Raj uses Newari Chātas to challenge the hegemony of Western narrativist historiography based on chronology, causal explanation and teleology. A. von Rospatt studies specimens of the same textual category, in his case relating to the Newar Buddhist communities at the Svayambhūcaitya, Kathmandu. He shows how records of past actions provide a framework for collective practice. C. Sibille’s contribution leads from pre-modern Nepal to

1 www.hadw-bw.de/nepal.html [accessed 30 November 2017].

the present, discussing how digitalisation of archival records and the cross-linkage of their content is changing archival practice.

The recording, preservation and transmission of legal titles has been a major concern of South Asian documentary cultures since antiquity. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that law represents the largest thematic unit in this volume. D. Acharya gives an insight into the law of debt in 17th century Mithila. R. O'Hanlon traces the changing role of witnesses and written evidence in property disputes in the Maratha judicial system from the early modern to the colonial period. Three papers are devoted to Nepal's legal history during the Rāṅṅā period. R. Khatiwoda draws on documents to prove that Nepal's first legal code of 1854 was actually enforced. A. Michaels investigates a letter from Jaṅga Bahādura Rāṅṅā to a *dharmasabhā* in Benares of the same time, which shows that traditional centres of jurisprudence were still called upon. S. Cubelic enquires into local inflections of the legal regulations on revenue farming in early 20th century Kathmandu.

Especially from the early modern period onwards, South Asia witnessed increasing administrative documentation, owing to the influence of Islamic polities and the European colonial presence. Emerging bureaucracies and the state building process in Nepal come to the fore in the three subsequent papers. M.P. Joshi and M.M. Joshi study the role of local elites in the consolidation of Gorkhali rule in Kumaon. G. Krauskopff uses the Tharu as a case study to show how the governmental strategies of the Nepalese and the colonial state affected the political and economic life of that group. M. Bajracharya's contribution on a Newar *munshi* highlights the opportunities which the professionalisation of bureaucracy offered scribal groups.

The growth of administrative documentation altered not only techniques of rule and the interaction of state and society, but also the relationship between the state and religious and ritual activity, as the last three articles of this volume demonstrate. M. Horstmann shows for Rajasthan and C. Zotter for Nepal that ascetic organisations adopted documentary and bureaucratic practices to negotiate with the state. Finally, A. Zotter's piece on the Dasāī festival in 19th-century Nepal demonstrates that bureaucracies were not only instrumental for centralizing political power, but also for ritual practices.

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Since this book is available in a searchable open-access digital format, we refrained from preparing an index. As to transliterations, there has been no attempt to impose a uniform system for non-Roman scripts on the contributions to this volume. Since conventions vary from discipline to discipline, decisions about transliteration have been left to the discretion of individual authors.

