

## Contemporary History Writing and Challenges of Historical Research in Nepal

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**Abstract:** Contemporary history writing is a shift from traditional descriptive history writing towards inclusive, pluralistic, and interdisciplinary approach of the past event. This shift is characterized by global intellectual debates, methodological advancements, and the recognition of marginalized voices. Microhistory focuses on everyday experiences and small communities, while global and transnational history challenge Eurocentric perspectives by linking local histories to broader structures of exchange and power. Historians use interdisciplinary techniques such as oral interviews, ethnography, and visual analysis blended with qualitative approaches. Historical research in Nepal is characterized by rich sources and profound challenges. This article examines the challenges in historical research in Nepal using a qualitative approach that incorporates secondary materials from published works and primary materials from unstructured open-ended interviews with five academics. A major research gap in systematic analyses of the research circumstances of historians in Nepal is identified by the study, which highlights the necessity of interdisciplinary training, theoretical innovation, and reform in archive preservation. Strengthening Nepali historiography and addressing these issues would ease the creation of historical knowledge that is inclusive, critical, and internationally recognized.

**Keywords:** Systematic analysis- postcolonial history- historical research- archival materials- contemporary history.

### INTRODUCTION

In contrast to previous political and military-focused narratives, contemporary history is characterized by a shift toward more inclusive, pluralistic, and multidisciplinary interpretations of the past. Global intellectual discussions, methodological advancements, and a rising dedication to including underrepresented perspectives have all influenced this change (Conrad, 2016). One of the most significant developments has been the diversification of historical subjects. Microhistory, for instance, investigates the experiences of everyday life and small communities to illuminate larger historical processes (Burke, 2001). Similarly, global and transnational history challenge Eurocentric frameworks by situating local experiences within wider networks of exchange and power (Portelli, 1997). Oral history and memory studies have further broadened the discipline, highlighting the interaction between personal experiences and collective remembrance (Ginzburg, 1993).

From a methodological perspective, historians continue to employ archival sources, official documents, and textual analysis, yet there is an increasing tendency to incorporate interdisciplinary techniques such as oral testimony, ethnography, and visual interpretation (Thompson, 2000). Quantitative approaches, particularly those introduced during the cliometric revolution, remain influential, often integrated with qualitative strategies to enrich interpretation (Hudson, 2014). Comparative and thematic methods provide tools to trace cross-cultural connections and recurring

historical patterns, while digital humanities technologies have opened new possibilities for large-scale text mining and spatial mapping.

Philosophically, contemporary historiography acknowledges the interpretive and constructed character of historical knowledge, rejecting the notion of a single, objective truth in favor of multiple perspectives. Ethical considerations have become central, particularly in societies addressing legacies of violence and injustice, where questions of memory, reconciliation, and responsibility are deeply intertwined with historical practice (Jenkins, 2003). Theoretical orientations influencing contemporary historical writing include Marxist historiography, postcolonial and feminist approaches, Foucault's theories of discourse and power, the Annales School's focus on long-term structures, as well as newer frameworks such as global history and memory studies (Hobsbawm, 1997). Overall, contemporary historical writing is characterized by inclusivity, interdisciplinarity, and reflexivity, shifting away from linear and event-centered accounts toward more complex, diverse, and critically engaged narratives (Burke, 1990).

In Nepal, the evolution of historical writing has been shaped by a diverse range of traditions, beginning with early chronicles and genealogical accounts and gradually progressing toward modern academic historiography by the mid-twentieth century. Initially, historical consciousness was largely constructed through courtly lineages and religious texts, which primarily served to

legitimize rulers and dynasties rather than critically analyze broader social realities (Mishra, 2003). With the establishment of Tribhuvan University in the 1959 and through the works of prominent scholars such as Baburam Acharya, Bal Chandra Sharma, Mahesh Chandra Regmi and Father Stiller and others, history began to emerge as a professional academic discipline. Yet, despite these advances, historical scholarship in Nepal continues to grapple with significant material, methodological, and institutional barriers, limiting its ability to fully align with global historiographical trends (Mishra, 2003).

Globally, historiographical debates have centered on the methodological and epistemological conditions that shape historical research. Rankean empiricism, with its emphasis on documentary evidence and claims to objectivity, long dominated Western historical practice. However, subsequent intellectual movements, such as the Annales School, Marxist historiography, subaltern studies, and postcolonial theory, challenged positivist assumptions and widened the scope of inquiry (Chatterjee, 2012). These debates underscore both the opportunities and constraints inherent in historical scholarship, particularly in contexts where archival resources are fragmented or where political regimes seek to influence historical narratives.

Within South Asia, the discourse has frequently revolved around the interplay between colonial legacies and indigenous knowledge traditions (Chakrabarty, 2000). Nepali subaltern studies, for example, critiqued the elitist biases of nationalist historiographies, while postcolonial theorists emphasized the recovery of marginalized voices and silenced experiences (Mishra, 2003). Comparative perspectives further suggest that postcolonial societies face common challenges in historical research, including the uneven preservation of documents, insufficient methodological training, and the politicization of archival documents (Prakash, 1990)

Although Nepali historiography draws upon a wealth of potential sources, its engagement with global historiographical developments has remained limited. Much of the existing scholarship tends to be descriptive rather than analytical, with an emphasis on political events, rulers, and military conflicts (Shaha, 1990). Father Stiller, for instance, highlighted nation-building narratives, while subsequent researchers shifted attention toward state formation and socio-economic

transformations. However, systematic incorporation of theoretical frameworks has been relatively rare. Archival research also remains underdeveloped, largely due to fragile manuscripts and restricted accessibility (Bhandari, 2021). Moreover, the production of history in Nepal has often been shaped by state agendas, with official curricula and publications prioritizing nationalist narratives. The politicization of the history and pseudo-historical approach in history writing has led to the establishment of vested interest groups in recent times. European imperialist viewpoints have greatly influenced Nepali historiography, especially in the use of colonial vocabulary and interpretative frameworks. A prominent indication of this effect may be observed in the portrayal of the events of 1857 in British India. Indian nationalist historians have conceived the rebellion as the First War of Independence, highlighting its anti-colonial and popular aspects, but European colonial historians described it as a "Sepoy Mutiny." It is noteworthy that many modern Nepali historians have adopted the European nomenclature and interpretation of the event by calling it a sepoy mutiny. This is indicative of the long-lasting influence of colonial history and an acceptance of imperial epistemologies. This tendency demonstrates how colonial intellectual control extended beyond colonial countries and affected historical writing in Nepal as well (Mishra, 2003).

Scholars such as Tirtha Mishra (2003), Dil Bahadur Kshetry (2011), Ramesh Shrestha (2019), Rajesh Gautam (2007), Bharat Jangam (2020), and Arjun Bhandari (2021) have made notable contributions to the discourse on Nepali historiography. Mishra has critically examined the broader issues of historical writing, while Kshetry and Shrestha concentrated on the chronological reconstruction of Nepal's past. Jangam and Bhandari, in turn, questioned the interpretation of historical facts and events, though their works did not fully address the broader methodological and institutional challenges confronting contemporary historical research in Nepal. Despite these significant contributions, the existing literature leaves empirical and methodological gap for further inquiry into the constraints and possibilities of Nepali historiography.

Despite valuable contributions from previous scholars, a systematic examination of the challenges encountered by historians in Nepal remains largely absent. While existing literature acknowledges issues of archival access,

preservation, and politicization, there has been limited empirical research exploring how historians themselves perceive and navigate these constraints in practice. Furthermore, Nepali historiography has rarely been analyzed through contemporary theoretical frameworks: such as postcolonialism, discourse analysis, or subaltern studies, creating a disconnect between global historiographical debates and local scholarly practices. Another overlooked dimension concerns linguistic barriers: primary sources in Sanskrit, Newari, Pali, and various local dialects often remain inaccessible to researchers whose training is predominantly in Nepali and English.

This study seeks to address these gaps by integrating qualitative interview data with secondary literature in order to systematically identify and interpret the challenges of historical research in Nepal. Specifically, the research aims to:

- Examine the obstacles historians face in Nepali historical research
- Evaluate these challenges with postcolonial contexts and theoretical approaches to strengthen

### **Nepali historiography.**

By fusing empirical evidence with historiographical theory, this study contributes both to the field of Nepali history and to broader international debates in historical scholarship. It emphasizes the need to cultivate inclusive narratives that move beyond state-centered accounts and to expand methodological approaches. It seeks to situate Nepali historical research within the wider landscape of global historiography and to reinforce its scholarly foundations.

## **METHOD AND MATERIALS**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate the challenges associated with historical research in Nepal. The research questions seek to understand experiences, perspectives, and practices rather than to test predetermined hypotheses. It engages the experiences of historians and researchers to collect descriptive data through in-depth interview. This design further enables the institutional, methodological, and theoretical constraints that shape the challenges of historical research in Nepal.

### **Sampling Strategy**

The study used purposive sampling method, selecting respondents who possess direct expertise in historical research. A total of five respondents were interviewed, including university professors of history, independent scholars, and researchers affiliated with academic institutions. Purposive sampling was chosen because it ensures the relevant knowledge and experience. The relatively small sample size is consistent with qualitative traditions, where the goal is not statistical generalization but analytical depth.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Following methods of data collection were used in this research.

**Unstructured Interviews:** Open-ended, conversational interviews were conducted with five respondents. This format allowed participants to speak freely about their experiences, challenges, and reflections. Interview sessions typically lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes. Responses were recorded in field notes and, where consent was provided, through audio recordings. Additionally, an open-ended questionnaire was asked to the same respondents to capture supplementary reflections.

**Secondary Sources:** To complement interview data, secondary sources such as published books and journal articles were analyzed. These sources provided background knowledge of the research as well as the theoretical, methodological and empirical gap on the subject.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected for this study were examined through narrative analysis method. This approach emphasizes the stories and accounts provided by respondents, focusing on how individuals interpret their experiences and how these narratives reflect wider institutional and cultural contexts. Interview transcripts and responses to open-ended questionnaires were thematically coded into categories. After categorizing codes themes have been developed. Thematic patterns were then interpreted by considering both the perspectives of the respondents and insights from relevant historiographical theories.

Narrative analysis is well-suited for this study because it enables the exploration of diverse experiences of the historians. By incorporating secondary sources into the interpretation process, this approach facilitates

communication between firsthand recollections and well-established scholarly works.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study follows established ethical protocols in qualitative research. Participants were fully informed about the objectives of the research, their right to withdraw at any stage, and the procedures adopted to safeguard confidentiality. To preserve anonymity, respondents are not identified by name but are instead referred to through coded designations (e.g., Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2 and so on). Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. Particular care was taken in handling sensitive information, especially when it involved political or institutional critiques, ensuring that such data were presented with discretion and respect for participants' perspectives.

### **Researcher Positionality**

As the researcher is actively engaged in the field of Nepali history, reflexivity was critical throughout the study. The researcher acknowledged their positionality shaped by academic training, disciplinary commitments, and personal perspectives and remained mindful of how this positionality could influence both data collection and interpretation. By maintaining reflexive field notes and prioritizing participants' voices, the study sought to minimize bias while recognizing that complete objectivity is neither possible nor desirable in qualitative inquiry.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The findings from interviews and secondary sources indicate that historical research in Nepal is shaped by a complex set of interrelated challenges. These challenges can be categorized into five major thematic areas: (1) access to archives and primary sources, (2) methodological limitations, (3) theoretical gaps, (4) language barriers, and (5) institutional and political constraints. Each theme is discussed below, integrating empirical data from respondents with broader historiographical debates.

#### **Access to Archives and Primary Sources**

A recurring concern among respondents was the difficulty of accessing primary sources. Despite Nepal's rich historical record, which includes royal decrees, inscriptions, manuscripts and religious texts, scholars frequently struggle to utilize these resources effectively. Interviewee 3, a university professor, noted that "many of our manuscripts are deteriorating physically, yet there is little effort to

preserve or digitize them." Similarly, Interviewee 5 highlighted bureaucratic obstacles, observing that "archival institutions remain underfunded and are often inaccessible without personal networks or official connections."

Secondary literature corroborates these observations. Regmi (1995) emphasized the fragility of Nepal's archival heritage, while Mishra (2003) documented the scattered and poorly catalogued nature of collections due to institutional neglect. Such challenges mirror broader postcolonial contexts, where state institutions often struggle to maintain archives and political priorities shape access (Prakash, 1990). Foucault's concept of the "archive as discourse" is particularly instructive here: archives not only preserve knowledge but also regulate what can be known (Foucault, 1972). In Nepal, selective preservation and restricted access reinforce dominant political narratives while marginalizing alternative histories.

#### **Methodological Limitations**

Respondents also highlighted a lack of methodological innovation in Nepali historiography. History writing in Nepal remains largely descriptive and event-focused, emphasizing chronological accounts of rulers, wars, and dynasties. Interviewee 2 stated, "Our training in history is still very traditional; students memorize dates and rulers but rarely learn critical methods of analysis." Interviewee 4 added that "interdisciplinary methods such as the use of anthropology, archaeology, or digital tools are rarely integrated into historical studies."

Secondary critiques support these observations (Shaha, 1990), noting that political history dominates while social, cultural, and economic dimensions remain underexplored. Globally, approaches such as the Annales School and subaltern studies have demonstrated the transformative potential of expanding methodological horizons (Bhandari, 2021). In contrast, Nepali historiography has yet to fully embrace such innovations, leaving its methodological foundations relatively underdeveloped.

#### **Theoretical Gaps in Historiography**

Closely linked to methodological issues is the limited engagement with theoretical frameworks. Most respondents acknowledged that Nepali historical writing rarely incorporates explicit theory. As Interviewee 2 remarked, "When we

publish history, we focus on facts, but we seldom connect them to theoretical debates happening globally.” Mishra (2003) similarly argued that Nepali historiography has often been shaped by nationalist imperatives rather than critical scholarship. While historians such as Father Stiller and Mahesh Chandra Regmi produced significant empirical studies, their work was generally not situated within contemporary historiographical theory.

This theoretical neglect narrows the analytical scope of research, limits opportunities for comparative insight, and reinforces state-centered narratives. Integrating frameworks such as postcolonial theory could help scholars interrogate the influence of colonial legacies and nationalist agendas on historical writing, while subaltern studies could illuminate the experiences of marginalized groups often absent from mainstream narratives (Chatterjee, 2012).

### Language Barriers

Language constitutes another major obstacle. Historical sources in Nepal are written in diverse languages, including Sanskrit, Bhojpur, Newari, Pali, Maithili, and classical Nepali. However, many contemporary historians lack the linguistic skills necessary to engage with these texts. Interviewee 1 explained, “We rely heavily on foreigner’s works, which means we sometimes miss the crux of the original texts,” while Interviewee 5 added, “Many valuable documents remain inaccessible because very few scholars today can read classical Newari or Sanskrit or Pali.” Even contemporary historians who have received their education primarily in the Nepali language often face difficulties in critically interpreting and analyzing the core arguments and underlying assumptions of historical works produced by foreign scholars. As a result, foreign interpretations are frequently accepted uncritically, which contributes to the continued influence of external perspectives in Nepali historiography.

Limited availability of reliable sources makes the problem, privileging sources in more accessible languages, particularly Nepali and English, and skewing historical narratives. Regmi (1995) stressed the importance of philological skills, yet institutional curricula often fail to prioritize language training. Theoretically, this aligns with Chakrabarty’s (2000) argument in *Provincializing Europe*, which underscores the need to engage with local epistemologies and languages rather than relying solely on translations shaped by

colonial or nationalist frameworks. In Nepal, neglecting linguistic diversity limits historical accuracy and marginalizes communities whose histories remain unwritten.

### Institutional and Political Constraints

Institutional weaknesses and political pressures represent the most pervasive challenge. Respondents consistently noted that historical research in Nepal is shaped by state agendas. Interviewee 4 observed, “The history taught in schools and colleges, even in universities, is more about legitimizing nationalism than encouraging critical analysis.” Limited funding and the absence of research grants were also the issues on research. “Without institutional support, historians cannot conduct fieldwork or archival studies,” Interviewee 4 noted. Populism and vote politics also shaped Nepali historiography. The debates surrounding the historicity of Bhrikuti, the deliberate divinization of Bhimsen Thapa, Shankhadhar Sakha, and the predominantly critical portrayals of Jung Bahadur Rana and Chandra Shumsher Rana are notable examples of the politicization of Nepali history. Such selective interpretations and value-laden portrayals contribute to the distortion of historical narratives and risk misinforming ordinary readers, scholars, and students alike, as aptly observed by Interviewee 5.

Secondary sources reinforce these concerns. Shaha (1990) and Mishra (2003) documented how history curriculum have been used to construct divinity identities, often excluding balance historical inquiry perspectives and undermine the objectivity of historical understanding. This pattern reflects global critiques of state instrumentalization of history (Anderson, 1991). Politicization of historical research undermines academic freedom, restricting the production of independent scholarship. From a theoretical perspective, this phenomenon aligns with Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), in which ruling elites control cultural production, including historical narratives, to maintain social and political power.

### Synthesis of Findings

These findings indicates that historical research in Nepal is confronted with a multi-dimensional set of challenges, including the accessibility of archival sources, limited methodological rigor, unused of theoretical frameworks, linguistic barriers, and institutional weaknesses. Such obstacles not only effect the production of high-

quality historical scholarship but also constrain Nepali historical research in the global context.

The narratives of the respondents demonstrate a proactive engagement in improvement and understanding these constraints. Scholars emphasized the possible advantages of incorporating global ideas, using multidisciplinary approaches, and strengthening institutional support. These findings imply that there is a substantial chance to improve and revolutionize historical research in Nepal by focused systemic changes in areas like academic training, research infrastructure, and archive preservation.

## CONCLUSION

Historical research in Nepal has been facing numerous barriers, such as limited access to archival materials, inadequate methodological training, and lack of theoretical framework integration, linguistic impediments, and institutional as well as political constraints. These obstacles have made it difficult for Nepali historians to critically analyze the nation's rich historical records, which include chronicles, religious texts, inscriptions, manuscripts, and oral traditions.

The foundations of historical research are at risk due to the absence of concerted reforms and methodological tools. This situation is further hampered by fragile manuscripts, scattered collections, and bureaucratic restrictions. Methodologically, Nepali historiography remains largely descriptive, focusing primarily on dynastic and political narratives. Many historians continue to employ descriptive writing rather than analytical approaches. Only a few scholars have engaged in examining the social, cultural, and economic dimensions of Nepal's history, and they are often criticized by traditional historians who remain conservative and resistant to methodological change.

Theoretical engagement remains a critical issue in Nepali history writing practice. Historians in Nepal have seldom situated their analyses within contemporary theoretical paradigms. In South Asian context, it emphasizes the perspectives of historically marginalized groups. Integrating such approaches would allow Nepali historians to interrogate the hierarchies of power embedded in historical knowledge production and to align local history with broader intellectual perspectives. Linguistic barriers further exacerbate these theoretical and methodological limitations. A

good number of Nepal's primary historical sources available in Sanskrit, Newari, Pali, and other local languages. Only few historians possess the linguistic competence to engage with these texts critically. Developing language proficiency has been regarded as a foundational component of historical research rather than a peripheral skill. Political and institutional constraints obstacles the critical history writing in Nepal. Insufficient funding, inadequate research infrastructure, and state-influenced narratives have restricted scholarly autonomy, while the politicization of historical writing undermines academic freedom and sustains narrow interpretations of the national history. Addressing these enduring challenges necessitates comprehensive institutional and methodological reform. Efforts should prioritize the preservation and digitization of archival materials, the establishment of independent research institutes, and the incorporation of theoretical and interdisciplinary frameworks into university curriculum. Methodologically, Nepali historical research must transcend its predominantly descriptive orientation, engaging instead with interpretive and critical traditions such as Subaltern Studies to illuminate marginalized histories and reimagine the national narrative. Ultimately, revitalizing the practice of history in Nepal extends beyond documenting the past; it constitutes an intellectual project aimed at reconstructing the epistemological foundations and inclusive futures of the nation.

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