



In 2024, the *Centre for South Asian and Himalayan Studies* (Centre d'études sud-asiatiques et himalayennes, CNRS/EHESS) is organizing an international conference open to all disciplines in the social sciences and humanities on the topic of the aftermath of catastrophes in South Asia and the Himalayas. The theme of this conference is in keeping with recent, global-scale and transdisciplinary reflections on the way the modern world thinks about and deals with disasters and the unexpected, be they ecological, technological or health-related, whether they are collective or individual. The recent Covid-19 pandemic, widespread climate change, the collapse of biodiversity, the spread of armed conflicts and the resulting humanitarian problematics are all reshaping state, social and even cultural structures, and require us to think along these lines, since catastrophes are no longer exclusively the purview of dystopian imagination. Closely linked to uncertainty, risk and modernity, catastrophes brutally interrupt everyday life, forcing men and women to rethink their place in the world. In order to use catastrophes as a heuristic tool or reading key, it is important to consider them in the *longue durée* of their aftermath.

Over the past twenty years or so, the humanities and social sciences have been paying an increasing amount of attention to catastrophes. After examining the ways in which catastrophes are labelled and managed, and the phenomena of reconstruction, collective mourning, memorialization and ritualization, the focus has now shifted to the development of a common theoretical framework to enable global-scale reflection on situations that are nonetheless singular. One of the aims of this conference is to contribute to this conceptual work on the basis of long-term research carried out in the context of South Asia and the Himalayas.

Furthermore, the shift in terminology from "event" to "catastrophe" raises questions both about the ways in which catastrophes are mediatized, and about the processes involved in documenting and memorializing collective tragedies: the "making" of a catastrophe, followed by its historical reconstitution in rival or even contradictory narratives, shows the extent to which it has become central to collective imagination, and imbued with a history, social practices and collective rituals, on both large and small scales (family rituals, for example).

In South Asia and the Himalayas, catastrophes are of many kinds: from 1947 Partition to the occupation of Tibet and the following exile in 1959, from the Bhopal industrial catastrophe (1984) to the winter 2004 tsunami that hit India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka, or the many earthquakes that regularly shake the region such as more recently in Pakistan (2005), eastern Tibet (2008, 2010), and Nepal (2015). All these catastrophes firstly had a major impact on populations—displaced persons, victims, families or witnesses—but these events also had a lasting effect on the social, state and cultural order. What forms of governance and political contestation do catastrophes give rise to? How are catastrophes documented, memorialized and passed on? How are catastrophe-related knowledges—historical, medical, legal, administrative, both official and informal—constituted and disseminated? In addition to the urgency experienced in relation to catastrophes, what are the temporalities involved?

The prevalence of social inequalities (linked to caste, class, gender or religion) reinforces the vulnerability of certain social groups to catastrophes and the difficulty they experience in being acknowledged as victims. Therefore, it is also important to consider the social and political construction of catastrophes. What "makes" a catastrophe, and for whom? Taking India as an example, the destruction of the *Babri Masjid* mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 by Hindu fundamentalists was perceived as catastrophe for the Muslim community. For others, however, it represented a—positive—return to Hindu order. The event is therefore a contested catastrophe, and its impact is intensified by the fact that its victims are not recognized.

Certain events—a bus accident that kills an entire family, gender violence within a family, the breadwinner's death, a political assassination—are perceived and passed on as events that will irrevocably disrupt the "small" community's order and balance. Can they be called catastrophes? What do ways of coping with shame, illness, violence or death—such as ritual or heritagization practices—have in common when they are performed on the family scale, on that of a religious community or of an entire region? How does the role of family solidarity, caste associations, NGOs and state institutions vary according to a disaster's scale?

The conversation will in particular be focused on subjectivity construction. People living in the aftermath of catastrophe are seen as victims in public discourse, sometimes as plaintiffs in court, often claiming compensation in relation to the state—all at the same time. They generally wear multiple hats, and speak in several different registers. This applies to Bhopal, for example: more than thirty years after the explosion of the Union Carbide chemical plant, questions of compensation are still shaping identity mechanisms and interpersonal relations on a city-wide scale. What mechanisms govern subjectivity in the face of disaster? How do different forms of subjectivity enrich or contradict each other? What is their impact on individual biographical trajectories—observable, for example, through the collection of life stories?

Finally, catastrophes require us to reflect on how we practice research itself in the face of unexpected events: how do they disrupt the practices and knowledge of those who seek it? Just as they undermine state and social orders, it seems undeniable that they destabilize cultural frameworks. More generally, catastrophes open up new research areas that may seem to call for an immediacy which is, however, often unachievable: is it possible to approach them with detachment without neglecting the emotions they arouse? How can we investigate an emotionally-charged event while allowing for the distance required by research ethics?

From a scientific point of view, this conference promotes a multidisciplinary approach to Himalayan and South Asian research, where contemporary debates on crisis management, ecological issues, the restitution and documentation of the past and of memory—in other words, the fragility of categories, the upheaval of certainties, the management of versatility as a condition of the contemporary world—play a crucial role.

In order to explore the many facets that make up the aftermath of catastrophes, we will focus on the following lines of inquiry:

— The politics of catastrophe

As we saw during the Covid-19 pandemic, catastrophe is often the jumping-off point—if not the pretext—for the implementation of exceptional political regimes. While some measures enacted in times of crisis are lifted after several months or years, others linger on and end up having a lasting effect on social relations and their organization. How can we characterize post-catastrophe modes of governance? Under what conditions can the biopolitics of catastrophe become stabilized in the political arena?

— Memorializing catastrophe: from experiencing to remembering catastrophe

Who has authority over the history and memory of a catastrophe? How and by whom is a catastrophe documented, and for what purposes? A catastrophe's narrativization determines how it is perceived, experienced and remembered, and is the result of both memory work (that can be either collective or individual) and the denial of the catastrophic character of the event. Moreover, the production of knowledge on the causes and effects of the catastrophe is a major challenge for the communities affected, who seek to produce a narrative that is satisfactory from the point of view of their experience and coherent from the point of view of the events. The development of citizens' expertise on the catastrophe can rely on technical and logistical assistance from NGOs and national and international volunteers—an assistance mobilized in response to government action that is inadequate and/or insufficient (or so deemed). How do narratives about the catastrophe's origins, circumstances and consequences stabilize in the public arena? On what kinds of affects and bonds are post-catastrophe forms of citizenships?

— Collective mobilization of emotions

How do we deal with emotions when investigating catastrophic events? How do we deal with situa-

tions that lead to multiple deaths with devastating effects? Beyond the individual pain of loss, how are emotions managed and mobilized, both for cathartic purposes and to build, through emotion, a collective memory that binds the community together? Conversely, how can emotions structure protest movements and, in some cases, connect the catastrophe to global economic, ecological or health issues? How do collective emotions contribute to the construction of a catastrophe's narrative?

This question is also methodological and ethical. What methodological tools are best suited to the study of emotions? How can we conduct research about populations and individuals who are experiencing tragedy? And how do we deal with our own emotions in the face of catastrophe?

— Family dynamics and catastrophes

The family serves as a lens to highlight aspects of collective catastrophe management that are often overlooked, bringing certain vulnerabilities to the fore or exacerbating tensions that may exist within communities. How do catastrophes and the measures put in place to care for victims transform relationships and kinship structures? What's more, some catastrophes occur at the small-scale level of the family, or even of individual lives: how do they affect the social fabric, and what inequalities do they give rise to or uncover anew? How are family dynamics, be they economic or spatial, recomposed? How do catastrophes induce changes in family trajectories?

— Social (re)configurations

Catastrophes are revelatory of social structures as much as they are transformative. From gender norms to commensality rules or class hierarchies—everything is turned upside down by catastrophe, although it does not affect all social groups in the same way. What perspective on social hierarchies does catastrophe provide? Does it

provide an opportunity to imagine society in a new way, to imagine the aftermath? Or does it, on the contrary, reinforce pre-existing vulnerabilities, crystallizing relations of domination? What resources can be mobilized for such reconstruction, and what forms of emancipation or, on the contrary, domination are revealed?

— Figurations of catastrophe

Arts and literatures have often been the first—and sometimes massively—to weave a tale of catastrophe, preceding history and its supposed objectivity. What narratives and representations do they

produce? Can they document catastrophes, and if so, how? Finally, what do they tell us about the contexts in which they were produced, and what do they teach us about the ways in which catastrophes are memorialized and constituted as a heritage? We will also be looking at the cathartic and therapeutic functions of representations of catastrophe, as well as at their role in community formation: how do arts and literatures contribute to "living-after"? What do dystopian representations—or, conversely, utopias—have to say about *post-catastrophe* imaginaries and ways of life?

**to all disciplines
in the social sciences
and humanities**

**"event" to "catastrophe"
collective or individual**

**global-scale
and transdisciplinary
reflections**

**Paper
500 words film
photography
performance**

Paper proposals should be around 500 words in length and include a title, a presentation of the main arguments, objects and methods, and which of the line (or lines) of inquiry listed above the talk could fit into. They must be submitted by September 25, 2023 at the latest via the website: <https://catastrophe.sciencesconf.org>.

We also welcome alternative ways of presenting research (film, photography, performance). Such proposals should have the same format as for a scientific paper (presentation of around 500 words), but will need to specify the duration, conditions and equipment required.

We particularly encourage early-career researchers to submit a proposal. Depending on the final conference budget, we may be able to cover all or part of the costs associated with participation (transport, accommodation, visa).

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