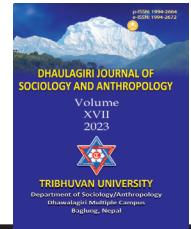


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Interview with Professor Ram Bahadur Chhetri

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Introduction and Background

Professor Ram Bahadur Chhetri was born in Dehradun, India, on April 4, 1952. He comes from a military and peasant socio-cultural background. After completing his high school education in Nagaland, India, he received his Intermediate and Bachelor's degrees at Prithvi Narayan Campus in Pokhara, Nepal. He was initially enrolled in the Master's in Political Science program at the Central Department of Political Science at Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Nepal. However, circumstances led him to earn an MA in Anthropology from Pune University in Maharashtra, India, in 1980. He eventually earned a PhD from the University of Hawaii, USA, in 1990.

As one of the founding faculty members of the Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Tribhuvan University (TU), Professor Chhetri has placed an indelible mark on the institution. His leadership as the department head from March 2003 to September 2007 and his presidency of the Sociological and Anthropological

Society of Nepal (SASON) from 1994 to 1996 testify to his influence. His retirement from the university in 2016 marked the end of an era. His career was also marked by numerous prestigious awards and grants, including the Fulbright Post-Doctoral Award (1997-98), the Fulbright Alumni Initiative Award (2002-2003) at the University of Georgia, USA, and the Visiting Researcher Fellowship (2003) in Bergen, Norway.

Professor Chhetri's work has left an indelible mark on anthropology. His anthropological publications, which delve into indigenous knowledge systems, have been instrumental in shaping our understanding of forest and irrigation management, refugee studies, and rotating credit associations. His research has spanned various geographical regions of the country, including Mustang, Doti, Kaski, Bajura, Jhapa, Rasuwa and Sindhupalchok districts. His contributions extend beyond academia, as he has served in various research institutions such as Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies, TU, Environment and Policy Institute East-West Center Honolulu, ICIMOD Nepal, Australia Community Forestry Project, DANIDA Community Forestry, CARE/Nepal, MFSC Nepal,



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ChFDP, GTZ, WWF Nepal, CVICT, Forest Action Nepal, Resources Himalaya Foundation, IDRC, SDC Kathmandu, and UNHCR/FWLD.

He was a visiting faculty member and researcher at several universities in Europe and the USA, notably at the Centre for Development Studies, University of Bergen; Chr. Michelsen Institute, Norway; Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the Department of Anthropology, University of Georgia, USA; and the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands.

His endeavors led to networking and collaborations with the Wenner-Gren Foundation, USA, and Cornell University, which provided grants for faculty development and were instrumental in training young faculty members. He focused on organizing seminars, conferences, and publications of their output, emphasizing quality education and faculty capacity development and empowerment.

With this brief background, we request that he present details about his life and work.

Questions and Answers

Question 1: Could you please provide us with your personal and family information to introduce you before we begin the interview? Please include your date of birth, place, parents and family, school life, college, university education, number of children, etc.

Answer: I have a unique family, with Laxmi Chhetri and Gyanu Chhetri as my equal partners. With them, I have four sons but I do not have a daughter. As of now (2024), two of my sons are settled in the USA, and two are in Nepal. I descend from a very small family. I was born in Dehradun, India, on April 4, 1952. My father, Nar Bahadur Chhetri, worked in the Gorkha regiment in India, which is why I was born there. My mother, Bishnu Maya Chhetri, and my younger sister, who now lives in Pokhara with her family, were originally from the Parbat District, Dahare Deurali, Nibuwa-bot. I have never been there, but I hope to visit someday. My parents eventually settled in Syangja, Nuwakot, due to a cholera epidemic that claimed the lives of my father's elder brother and grandfather. To escape the disease, my grandmother moved the family to Nuwakot, Syanja. Later, they moved to Dhungesangu, ward number 15 in Pokhara, and my early education began at a school in Sammi village, south of Pokhara.

In early 1962, my father was posted in Nagaland, in North-East India, so he took me there; I had just completed my second grade. I graduated from Satakha Government High School in Nagaland in 1970, under the Board of Secondary Education, Guwahati, Assam, India.

I had hoped to continue my education in Assam; however, my father's retirement from the army took us to Nepal. As a result, I had to discontinue my education for two years before I could join college. Having never attended school, my father would have preferred me to join the army service; obtaining further education would not

have been on his list. However, due to the insurgency in Nagaland and the losses of so many lives that my father's company suffered, we used to hide inside the bunker, and I was not enrolled.

Although my dream was to study biological sciences and eventually become a medical doctor, that dream did not come true. Despite my father's lack of formal education, he valued practical work; after completing my HSLC exams with good results, he suggested I become a primary school teacher at the Indian pension camp in Pokhara. I accepted the position and taught there for two years. During this period, I also provided private tutoring in English and Mathematics to students preparing for the SLC exam. My father was content with my teaching job. During that period, I married Laxmi from Masbar, Pokhara.

I taught small children during the day and tutored them in the evenings. That kept me busy. There was one student who was weak in English and Mathematics and had already failed the ninth grade once and wanted to get my help to get through. With my tutoring help, he passed his ninth-grade exams and continued learning with me in the tenth grade. He then passed his SLC exam and was ready to go to college. He enrolled at the Prithvi Narayan (PN) College. When I found out that he had joined college, I was inspired by his determination to continue his education, and I enrolled myself in the Intermediate in Arts (IA) program during my school's summer vacation.

Since I was educated in India, my Nepali language was a mix of half-Hindi and half-Nepali. That's what I learned during my first term at the PN campus. After the evaluation, the vernacular Nepali teacher gave his exam and brought back the exam copies for the students. I discovered he had deliberately placed my copy at the bottom because he was unhappy with the language. I used to sit on the first bench. I always preferred the front seat, whether at the school in Nagaland or college in Pokhara. The teacher brought back the exam copies of the Nepali vernacular. He distributed them one by one. When the last remaining copy was there, he took up my answer book, saying, I wonder whose copy this is. I stood up and said, sir, it's mine. Having said this, I was expecting he would give me my examined copy. Surprisingly, he started lecturing about how Hindi novels influence students instead of giving them back. On the way back from school, having become close to a classmate, Tara Baral, I asked him about grammar books available there for the Nepali language. I bought one as he suggested. Because I was hurt, I spent my spare time reading and writing only Nepali during the holidays. I tried to make it up. In that batch of students at the PN campus, less than half of the 40-plus students who appeared for the exam had passed, and I was one of them. In that final exam, I caught up with all the students in my class, and luckily, I had the highest score. To pass in the second division was considered very well at that time.

I continued my studies at PN Campus and completed my BA, excelling in my exams. Here, I met Om Gurung,

a courageous student from Baglung who became a close friend. My father's skepticism about the value of prolonged education did not deter me. With my family's support and determination, I pursued higher education in Kathmandu.

During my studies, I balanced academic responsibilities with family life. My first son was born while I was completing my IA in 1972. Over time, all four of my sons pursued their educational paths, one of which was becoming a professor and researcher.

Reflecting on my journey, I recognize the challenges and sacrifices that shaped my path. My father's experiences and lack of formal education underscore the importance of perseverance and the transformative power of education. Despite his initial doubts, he was ultimately proud of my achievements.

Question 2: What factors or who influenced you to study Anthropology? What was the imagination to become an anthropologist during your college time?

Answer: My decision to pursue anthropology was shaped by circumstance rather than a personal choice. At Tribhuvan University, when five candidates were selected to study in India, three of us were told to study anthropology, while the remaining two studied sociology. It wasn't until I arrived in Pune and began attending lectures and exploring the library that I truly grasped the depth and breadth of anthropology. The subject's multidisciplinary nature and its exploration of human diversity, both physical and sociocultural, fascinated me. This fascination had roots in my childhood experiences, spending time among different Naga groups in Nagaland, and my exposure to the context of the army camps, where I encountered individuals from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. While I had observed this diversity firsthand, anthropology provided the theoretical framework that was previously missing.

I came to Kathmandu in 1975 with the initial purpose of establishing the Gyan Joyti Library in Pokhara. This endeavor led me to visit various offices, including the American, British, and Indian libraries, to collect books. Accompanied by a fellow National Development Service (NDS) student, we gathered a wide array of books, some of which were in English. Although obtaining permission from my family to pursue studies in Kathmandu's Kirtipur area was initially challenging, I eventually secured approval. My father once suggested using half of our property land for educational purposes, but I was adamant about preserving it as my ancestral heritage.

Initially, I embarked on the study of political science, recognizing its potential for academic success based on my performance during my BA studies. My consistent academic achievements and dedication to political science fueled my commitment to further my studies. During the NDS program, which mandated students a 10-month stay in a rural village, I was assigned to Manang, an experience for which I am grateful. After completing the NDS program, I returned to Kirtipur to continue my MA studies.

During a break from classes, I was visiting my family in Pokhara. Serendipity played a significant role in my academic journey when, during this visit, a friend introduced me to an opportunity to study sociology and anthropology in India. This chance encounter, coupled with the support of my friends, particularly Krishna Bhattachan, spurred me to apply for the program. We applied for the program with two friends from the PN Campus, Krishna Bhattachan and Om Gurung. Despite initial doubts about missing classes, I filed the paperwork just in time. A heartening moment occurred when our names were published in the newspaper as successful applicants.

Although initially unsure about pursuing the opportunity due to academic commitments, we eventually embarked on this journey. Our arrival in Pune was met with warmth, and we quickly became immersed in our studies. Although initially unfamiliar with Phanindreshowr Poudel and Padam Lal Devkota, we embraced the new academic environment and enthusiastically began our studies.

Question 3: What kind of anthropology did they teach at the University of Pune?

Answer: The anthropology curriculum at the University of Pune, India, offered an introductory overview, covering distinct branches such as cultural, archaeological, and physical anthropology. Practical sessions in physical anthropology were integral, facilitated by a well-equipped laboratory. However, our preparation for specialized fields like archaeological or biological anthropology was limited. Fortunately, upon arrival, efforts were made to streamline the syllabus, ensuring a focused and coherent direction for our studies.

Question 4: After your studies at the University of Pune, did you guys return to Nepal and begin teaching anthropology?

Answer: Our paths diverged upon returning to Nepal. Om Gurung, focused on completing his history thesis, ventured to Baglung, where he found a teaching position in history. Meanwhile, Krishna Bhattachan was occupied elsewhere, awaiting the commencement of his program with Phanindreshowr. The three of us convened in Pokhara, where fate intervened. Om was approached by someone from Baglung who insisted he teach there, leading him to secure a teaching position at the local campus due to a shortage of instructors.

As for me, I stayed behind initially, intending to assess the situation in Kirtipur. Upon learning about the syllabus development under the guidance of Dor Bahadur Bista, whom I knew from his written works, I sought him out. He was the then director of CNAS at Tribhuvan University. Despite initial skepticism, Bista recognized my potential contribution and appointed me as a researcher, a significant step given the absence of formal positions for anthropology or sociology lecturers. With this appointment came immediate employment and involvement in syllabus

development.

Bista's influence extended beyond this. He informed me of subject committee meetings, where I began actively participating and offering insights gleaned from my recent studies. Om, on the other hand, remained in Baglung, initially hesitant to return despite my encouragement, banking on the certainty of a historical position if anthropology didn't materialize.

Question 5: As one of the founding faculty members of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, what were the opportunities and challenges in teaching and fostering academic growth in these fields?

Answer: Initially, our main concern revolved around the availability of teaching faculty. The challenge lay in balancing the curriculum in Pune, where physical anthropology and archaeology were also being studied concurrently. Dr. Chaitanya Mishra assumed the role of the department's first head. At the same time, Dor Bahadur Bista, though qualified, opted not to take on the position, perhaps due to his concurrent role as the Executive Director of CNAS. This initial shortage of teaching staff and the inclusion of diverse subjects like physical and medical anthropology posed a challenge in designing the syllabus.

Accommodating sociology and anthropology within the same department required careful planning to ensure students received a comprehensive education without simultaneously feeling overwhelmed by studying two distinct subjects. This balancing act was a primary concern during the early stages of syllabus development.

Question 6: What theoretical and research trends were prevalent during your time at the University of Pune and the University of Hawaii? What memorable experiences did you encounter as an anthropology student? Could you also highlight the similarities and differences in the teaching and learning environments between these two universities?

Answer: After approximately five years of teaching, I was selected for an East-West Center fellowship. The application process was uncertain, as I knew colleagues who had applied for several years without success. Concurrently, I engaged in a new anthropology research project in the Mustang District. My application was also submitted for the East-West Center or Fulbright awards competition. At that time, I worked in Mustang under the guidance of Nabin Rai and Dr. Dahal, both University of Hawaii graduates.

The anthropology program at the University of Hawaii focused on students like me aspiring to become PhD candidates. They expected candidates to identify a theoretical perspective best suited to their research questions and to have a clear idea about their PhD thesis research. The only requirement was to choose two from three core courses: physical anthropology, cultural anthropology and archaeology, and their theoretical perspectives. Beyond these core courses, students had

the flexibility of choosing additional classes. The funding agency mandated taking a certain number of credit hours each semester, fostering an awareness of available courses and encouraging students to design their academic path based on their interests and relevance. This flexibility and openness in graduate education allowed for a personalized approach to learning.

Comparing the teaching and learning environments between the two universities, the University of Hawaii offered a more flexible and customizable approach to course selection. In contrast, the University of Pune had a more structured curriculum. Both environments provided valuable learning experiences, albeit with distinct approaches.

Question 7: Before the mid-1990s, your focus was on migration and adaptation, particularly concerning Tibetan refugees. Your PhD thesis explored the "Adaptation of Tibetan Refugees in Pokhara, Nepal." What factors influenced your selection of such topics?

Answer: Before I departed for Hawaii and even before applying for the East-West Center Fellowship, I was involved in a project at CNAS focusing on the Upper Mustang, specifically Lho-Manthang. This project delved into the cultural and historical aspects of the region, including interactions with Khampa warriors passing through. This exposure to Tibetan culture sparked my interest in undertaking further studies. Having already researched the Loba of Lho-Manthang, I realized the potential for deeper exploration. However, recognizing the transient nature of the Tibetan refugee population in Nepal and their likelihood of relocation, I saw an opportunity to study their culture and way of life before it potentially changed. This led me to shift my focus from solely studying the Loba to investigating the adaptation of Tibetan refugees. While I initially considered focusing my thesis exclusively on studies in Lho-Manthang, concerns arose regarding potential conflicts between my findings and existing reports. Consequently, I opted to concentrate on Tibetan refugees instead.

Question 8: Your writings have focused on natural resource management, particularly community forestry. Could you share how your research focus shifted and the circumstances that led you to study such topics?

Answer: The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development's (ICIMOD) invitation catalyzed my journey into community forestry studies. During my early months back from the University of Hawaii, I had the opportunity to connect with Jeff Fox, a researcher with a keen interest in resource management. While visiting him in Jawlakhel, I was introduced to Dr. Mahesh Baskota, who expressed interest in anthropology and discussed the need to study locally managed forest systems in Nepal. Despite my initial hesitation due to a lack of forestry knowledge, Dr. Baskota emphasized the importance of understanding

societal beliefs and practices related to forestry rather than technical forestry expertise.

Encouraged by Dr. Pitambar Sharma, a mentor from my time at the Kirtipur campus, I accepted ICIMOD's offer with the assurance of autonomy in conducting the research. I requested to work with Dr. Tulsi Pandey as a team member, and together, we embarked on a study to explore indigenous forest management practices in the Baitadi and Achham districts in far-Western Nepal. This study aimed to understand the rules and regulations guiding forest management and the role of villagers in protecting and managing forests despite state ownership.

Our findings were well-received, leading to further opportunities in forestry. I was approached by an Australian forestry team leader who sought my assistance as a social scientist in their project. Negotiating time between my commitments at Tribhuvan University and the new opportunity, I delved deeper into forestry-related issues, marking a significant shift from my previous focus on Tibetan refugees. This transition culminated in a book titled "User Group Forestry in the Far-Western Region of Nepal: Case Studies from Baitadi and Achham" and a paper on the Rotating Credit Association published in the journal, "Human Organization."

Question 9: You've been the recipient of various awards, fellowships, and research grants, notably including the Fulbright Post-Doctoral Award (1997-98) and Fulbright Alumni Initiative Award (2002-03) at the University of Georgia, USA, and Visiting Researcher Fellowship (2003) in Bergen, Norway, among others. What were the key academic insights gained from these awards and fellowships, and how did you apply these learnings?

Answer: Upon returning from Hawaii, my primary focus was securing resources to involve students and junior faculty members in research endeavors. This emphasis persisted from my initial study with ICIMOD onwards. For example, when tasked with studying indigenous forest management practices with ICIMOD, I selected Dr. Tulsi Pandey to assist in managing the responsibilities. Additionally, I aimed to integrate insights from these projects into classroom materials, ensuring relevance for students.

My experiences in Georgia and Bergen inspired me to organize an international conference to facilitate knowledge sharing among Nepali and foreign colleagues. The Wenner-Gren Foundation Award aimed to promote anthropological research. Although I had completed my tenure when it was awarded, I sought to facilitate research opportunities for young teachers in the department. Six faculty members had the chance to spend a semester at Cornell University through this grant, fostering discussions on various anthropological topics and providing a platform to share and develop research.

Similarly, the Fulbright Post-Doctoral Award at

the University of Georgia allowed me to explore new developments in anthropology and consider their applicability to our department. Despite the challenges of finding students suitable for this opportunity, I intended to identify students focused on future endeavors. The Fulbright Alumni Initiative Award supported two students, Bidhya and Sanjeev Pokhrel, who completed their Master's with resources from Bergen University.

Given the scarcity of resources, seeking funding for research or study programs has always been a priority. The Fulbright Alumni Initiative Award, which I applied for after consulting with professors Kathy March and David Holmberg, provided substantial funding for our institution, supporting faculty exchanges, conferences, fieldwork grants, and research projects. This initiative aimed to elevate the department's research output and establish it as a respected institution within the anthropological community.

Question 10: You've been actively involved in organizing national and international seminars, often resulting in the publication of conference proceedings and books. Could you elaborate on how you managed to organize these events and the specific role you played?

Answer: As the organizer representing the Department of Sociology and Anthropology for the conference, I collaborated with the Sociological and Anthropological Society of Nepal (SASON) to facilitate these events. Assuming the role of committee president or similar, whether as Department Head or committee chairman, I always sought to initiate meaningful endeavors. The genesis of these conferences can be traced back to my experiences at the University of Georgia, where I sought guidance from Prof. Robert Rhodes, among others.

Building upon the networking with colleagues at the University of Georgia, we organized conferences working with European and American colleagues and were able to make publications of that work.

Question 11: You served as the Editor of the Occasional Papers in Sociology and Anthropology, published by the Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, Nepal. What challenges did you face in this role, and what suggestions would you offer for improving the publication process of journals by Central Departments?

Answer: During my tenure, we published several issues of the Occasional Papers, albeit not as regularly as desired. One major challenge was ensuring the quality of the published content. While there's a culture of editing, reading, and commenting during the publishing process, it often remains on paper without thorough implementation. Neglecting necessary edits can lead to articles with poor language and grammar, making them difficult to read and assess.

Regardless of my position within the department, I prioritized the quality of outputs, aiming to minimize

errors in publications from the University Department. It was essential to avoid situations where our products would be ridiculed due to subpar English or content quality. We produced two occasional papers during my tenure, and I meticulously reviewed them before publication. I encouraged others to follow suit, ensuring that papers underwent thorough scrutiny and correction before being sent for publishing, thereby enhancing readability and credibility.

I advocated regularizing occasional papers focusing on contemporary issues relevant to anthropology. Journals should center on topics of anthropological interest to maintain the subject's relevance and productivity.

Furthermore, there were baseless grievances against me during my tenure, often stemming from misunderstandings or ulterior motives. Some students complained about the syllabus or lectures, while others raised concerns about financial matters related to conferences. Contrary to misconceptions, any surplus funds from conferences were strictly safeguarded and reinvested for departmental or organizational benefits. I ensured transparency and integrity in financial management, preserving funds for future initiatives.

In conclusion, my tenure as Editor highlighted the importance of upholding quality standards and transparency in publishing processes, ensuring that academic outputs reflect the department's commitment to excellence.

Question 12: As the Head of the Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology at Tribhuvan University, could you share your experiences with us as lessons? What were your major challenges in building higher academic standards at the department?

Answer: During my four-year tenure as the Head of the Department, we achieved several milestones. We ensured regular publications of occasional papers in Sociology and Anthropology, releasing two issues during that time. Additionally, I prioritized student engagement, facilitating discussions before exams to guide their study strategies and address any queries they had. I aimed to foster regular interaction between faculty and students.

One such significant initiative was organizing a week-long seminar on thesis research and writing. I observed that many students struggled with their thesis proposals, often due to poor language and incorrect sequencing. The workshop aimed to address these issues and enhance students' research skills. While some students genuinely appreciated the seminar and acknowledged its benefits, others, perhaps influenced by external factors, opposed it. However, those who attended and engaged in the sessions gained valuable insights into proposal writing and research-focused methodologies.

Fieldwork supervision also played a crucial role in our department's activities. I guided students in selecting research questions and methodologies. One memorable experience was our group trip to Chaubas in

Sindhupalchowk District, which proved to be an enriching and insightful endeavor.

Navigating these challenges and implementing initiatives to improve academic standards required dedication and collaborative efforts from both faculty and students. Despite occasional resistance, our collective endeavors aimed to elevate the department's education and research quality.

Question 13: Sociology and Anthropology were initially established as a joint department in 1981 but later separated. How do you assess the growth and development of anthropology at Tribhuvan University after 2015?

Answer: Initially, both departments struggled due to insufficient faculty. However, over time, faculty resources on both sides improved. While sociology focused on contemporary issues, anthropology delved into the required theoretical studies and research. Separating the departments has its merits but also leads to a lack of discussion on common interests. Sociology and anthropology are closely related fields, often considered as sister disciplines, yet they seem to diverge in some of their trajectories.

Question 14: The anthropology curriculum at Tribhuvan University has undergone multiple revisions. You have been actively involved in finalizing various papers since the inception of the course until now. Could you identify the strengths and missing components in the anthropology curriculum for Nepal's MA, MPhil, and PhD courses?

Answer: I recall introducing four or five courses, including Anthropology of Resource Management, which became quite popular. However, some courses did not gain as much attention. For instance, I introduced a course on kinship out of personal interest, but its popularity was limited. I tailored the curriculum accordingly as I assessed the market and the need for employment opportunities post-graduation.

In addition to traditional topics, I believed it was essential to explore emerging fields such as Gender and Feminism. While these courses were formulated for MA students, PhD scholars can take specialized courses that align with their research topics.

Unlike in some other systems, there is a mandatory MPhil requirement before pursuing a PhD in Nepal. However, the system is different in the United States. There, graduate studies refer to a Master's leading into a PhD program, where the students undergo rigorous academic training, which we have not implemented here.

In my experience evaluating theses over the past few months, I've observed that many scholars seem focused on completing their degrees quickly rather than contributing innovations or insights to the field. This rush to obtain a PhD may hinder pursuing genuine scholarly exploration and discovery.

Question 15: Throughout your extensive involvement in anthropological endeavors spanning most of your life, what theoretical and methodological contributions have you made to anthropology in general and Nepal specifically? The social sciences seem less preferred in Nepal, and political leadership and bureaucrats rarely acknowledge their importance. What do you think about the future of social science in general and anthropology in particular?


Answer: Regarding theoretical and methodological contributions, I remember an anecdote. During a meeting in Kathmandu, a senior District Forest Officer (DFO) initially declined to participate because he wondered why social scientists should attend a meeting about forestry matters. However, later on, that individual became an admirer of our work due to our interactions. This incident reflects a common misconception. The moral of this story is that anthropological approaches can be employed effectively in diverse contexts. We must demonstrate how anthropology and social sciences contribute to understanding various disciplines, such as natural resources and others, offering new perspectives crucial for progress.

It is crucial to develop anthropology and social science courses promptly. Despite the scarcity of jobs for trained individuals, these subjects must extend beyond specific circles and contribute to a broader societal understanding.

Question 16: As a supporter of the Editorial Team of the Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology, what specific suggestions do you have for the team? How can we further develop this journal, focusing on particular areas and enhancing the quality and visibility of published papers?

Answer: Offering suggestions for improvement is complex. Your journal is commendably consistent in its publication schedule, covering diverse topics. While not all journals thrive, Dhaulagiri Journal has been successful. Including archaeological contributions relevant to anthropology could further enrich its content. Well-written research articles impart valuable insights.

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