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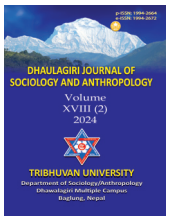

Interview with Professor Jeevan R. Sharma

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Introduction and Background

An eminent social scientist, Professor Jeevan R. Sharma was born in Palpa (1978), Nepal and educated in Nepal, India and the UK. He is a distinguished academic and Chair of South Asia and International Development at the School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, UK. He is also Co-director of the Centre of South Asian Studies at the University of Edinburgh. His research interests are broad, encompassing global health policy, international development, migration, and the socio-economic and political transitions in Nepal and the Himalayas. Professor Sharma has authored significant articles in various academic journals and book chapters, including books "Crossing the Border to India: Youth, Migration and Masculinities in Nepal (2018, 2019 and 2024)" and "Political Economy of Social Change and Development in Nepal (2021)". His contributions to the field are well-recognized, and he is also actively involved in various editorial roles, including co-editor of the journal Himalaya, co-editor of Routledge/Edinburgh South Asia Series. His research has been funded by The Wellcome Trust, ESRC, NERC, ICSSR, DFID, Scottish Funding Council, USAID/OFDA and Humanity United. He is the General Secretary of Britain Nepal Academic Council (BNAC). We thank Prof. Sharma for sharing personal life and professional work and responsibilities.

Question 1: Please provide us with your date of birth, place of birth, information about your parents and family, number of children, school life, college, and university education.

Answer: I was born in Tansen Palpa in 1978 as the fourth child of my parents. My father retired in 2005 as a civil servant after working for about 40 years for the Government of Nepal and spent most of his adult life working in different parts of Nepal. My mother is a housewife who had a primary caring responsibility for us. I have two sisters and a brother, two of them are civil servants in Nepal. My wife is also an academic who teaches and researches international relations at a University in the UK; she works in the field of international relations. We have two children aged 8 and 4. I grew up and went

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to school in Tansen. I grew up in a large family with my grandparents. My grandfather was a teacher in Tansen, and my grandmother was a housewife. I completed high school from the Janata Secondary School, a government-own school in Palpa. My memory of school life was that the teachers were very strict and there was emphasis on academic performance.

After finishing high school, I completed Intermediate in Science (ISc) from Tribhuwan Multiple Campus in Tansen in 1996 before moving to Kathmandu, where I completed my Bachelors in Arts (Social Work) at St Xavier's College in 1999. I went to Mumbai for my Masters in Urban and Rural Community Development from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, and returned back to Nepal to work as a Lecturer at St Xavier's College. I combined my lecturing job with research consultancy for two years before leaving for Edinburgh to start my PhD in Social Anthropology and South Asian Studies in 2003, which I completed in 2007.

Question 2: What factors or individuals influenced your decision to study Social Work at the Bachelor's level at Kathmandu University, Nepal, and Urban and Rural Development at the Master's level at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India?

Answer: Starting Bachelors in Social Work at St. Xavier's College was purely accidental. In early 1996, came across a small newspaper advertisement written in Gorkhapatra where St Xavier's College had posted an admission notice for a new undergraduate programme in Social Work. Prior to this, I had no idea that one could study social work. I knew nothing about the programme apart from a little knowledge I had about St. Xavier's College, as a Jesui-run private college in Kathmandu. I was initially skeptical about the scope of the programme, as this was a new programme. My brother had already relocated to Kathmandu for a job by that time. I remember going to St. Xavier's College in Maitighar to find out a bit more about the programme, and to collect the admissions form. The fees were higher than government colleges. After appearing in the entrance exam/interview and I was selected. It was taught in English, most teachers came from India. For someone who studied in a government school in Tansen, studying/writing in English was a challenge for me. Most of my classmates completed their schooling in private schools. I didn't do that well in the first semester but gradually improved afterwards, eventually graduating with a distinction. By then, my English, academic performance, and confidence had improved. We had three days of classroom teaching in Maitighar campus and two days of placement with NGOs in Kathmandu. The curriculum was influenced by an American and Indian model of social work education. During those days, Nepal attracted international attention due to the use of child labour in carpet and garment factories, the growing number of street children in cities like Kathmandu as well as women's trafficking for sex work to India. This was an attempt by the Jesuits to introduce a new professional cadre of social workers in Nepal using American and Indian models to respond to emerging challenges and social issues facing Nepal.

During Bachelor's degree, I was directly exposed to the booming NGO and development sector in Nepal. I was placed at CWIN, an NGO that works in the field of children's rights, in my first year which exposed me to the issue of street children and child labour. In the second year, I worked closely with ILO's programme on child labour. In third year, I worked at an NGO called Lumanti, an organization that worked with housing and other socio-economic rights of people living in squatters and slums in Nepal. As a part of the undergraduate programme I went to Gorkha for a fieldvisit in 1997, which was at the beginning of the insurgency, and went to Mumbai to look at the work of social work professionals there. I wrote my BA dissertation on street vending. More than the classroom teaching, my undergraduate degree's field component had a powerful impact on my learning. After completing the degree, many of my classmates and juniors from St Xavier's went on to pursue their careers in the development sector in Nepal, while others left for further studies abroad. I went to study Master's in Urban and Rural Community Development at Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai, India. I knew about TISS from my teachers at St Xavier's College. Similar to my undergraduate degree in Nepal, TISS had a similar model of 3-4 days of classroom teaching and two days of placement with an organization. We had to write weekly reports based on our fieldwork and submit and discuss our report with our supervisors. In the first year, I worked at a lawyer's collective in Andheri West in Mumbai that offered free legal advice to those who needed it; many of those seeking legal aid were women. In year two, I worked at a housing rights community-based organisation in Mumbai that exposed me to the politics of urban redevelopment, slum clearance, and regeneration. These field projects had powerful effects on me, as they enabled critical analytical skills, writing and reflectivity. I travelled to Uttrakhand for field visits on work of NGOs there on mountain development and similarly on community-based traditional medicine and rural development models in Maharashtra. I was a part of a team who went for post-Cyclone rehabilitation work in Orrisa in 2000. I wrote my MA dissertation on local perceptions of Melamchi Drinking Water Project, which was based on a fieldwork in Melamchi Valley in Nepal. I was awarded the best student award and five other awards during my graduation ceremony. Overall, my BA and MA degrees, particularly the fieldwork components, has had a huge impact on me as a person and a scholar.

When I returned from Mumbai, I was offered a lecturership at St Xavie's College, where I was once a student, and I undertook consultancies as a qualitative research consultant for a number of NGOs in Nepal. Not

only were these consultancies well-paid assignments, they allowed me to travel to different parts of rural Nepal, during the insurgency, but also honed my research skills. During my first assignment, I remember travelling to remote villages in Doti and Okhaldhunga for several weeks, which involved sleeping outdoors or at a local health post and walking for 6-7 hours a day. Probably, I learned more about the caste system during my field visits than I did during my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Our study team did not face any resistance from the Maoist activists, and we were able to conduct the fieldwork as planned although the study did not include districts where Maoists had significant control.

Question 3: You completed your PhD at the University of Edinburgh, School of Social and Political Science, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, UK. Can you compare the teaching and learning environments, as well as teacher-student relationships, across the three countries where you studied? Additionally, what were the prevailing theories and research trends during your studies, and how have they changed since then?

Answer: In Nepal, my BA in Social Work was a small programme with less than 30 students. This is not comparable to the large classroom size we find in Tribhuwan University colleges. In terms of teaching material and scholarship, there was very little focus on history, politics and sociology of Nepal. The classroom teaching was influenced by American and Indian models of social work education and had very little relevance to Nepal. Teaching was based on selected textbooks written in a very different context. As I discussed above, the most impressive component of this BA programme was the fieldwork for two days a week. I wish the programme had more emphasis on core social science training and critical scholarship. My MA degree at Mumbai was very different than my BA degree at St Xavier's College in Nepal. TISS Mumbai admitted around 100 students a year and recruited students from all over India. Entrance was highly competitive. The entire campus, classroom, dinning room and hostel, was a space for critical discussion and debates. The focus of teaching, research and field placement was on practice and critical thinking. We were encouraged to ask questions and engage in debates. During my MA degree, I was influenced by dependency and world-system theories, and my MA dissertation on Melamchi drinking water project was influenced by that. In India, the Narmada River movement was ongoing and many of us were a part of it. I had opportunities to meet and work with activists in Narmada Bacho Aandolan including Medha Patkar and Arundhati Roy, and many other activists. Post-colonialism, post-structuralism and post-development were very much in trend at that time. My PhD in Edinburgh was again very different to that of my BA and MA degrees. It was based on self-directed independent study and involved working closely with your supervisors. It involved a lot of reading and writing. As I did not come from traditional social science training like sociology or anthropology degrees, I used my PhD to get training in sociological and anthropological theories, methods and concepts, largely through independent study. Edinburgh South Asia has long established tradition in ethnography, and I was trained in ethnographic fieldwork and writing. Apart from regular supervision meetings, I took part in regular weekly seminars organized by Social Anthropology and Centre for South Asian Studies that were a critical part of my training. I spent the first year of my PhD developing my research proposal and undertaking research training; in the second year, I travelled to Nepal and India to do my year-long ethnographic fieldwork and in the third year, I went back to Edinburgh to write. My PhD fieldwork was interrupted by the Maoist insurgency and counter-insurgency in Nepal. As it became difficult to stay for a long time in the village, I used to travel to the village from Tansen on a daily basis. Later, I decided to follow a group of young men from the village who were leaving for Mumbai, which became a critical component of my PhD. My PhD project focused on socio-culutral and gendered meanings of male labour migration and I drew on the concept of masculinities. I was very much inspired by the concept of symbolic violence. During my PhD, postcolonial and post-structuralist theories were very popular. I did tutoring and some guest lecturing as a part of my doctoral training.

Questions 4: You have taught at Tufts University in the USA and the University of Edinburgh, UK. What were your learning experiences while teaching in these universities?

Answer: After I completed my PhD, I worked at Save the Children UK's office in London in Monitoring and Evaluation for about 18 months between 2007 and 2008 before returning to academia. Jobs in academia were competitive. I got invited to interviews for a couple of lecturerships at SOAS and London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine but I was not successful. I did not have any peer-reviewed publications by then. I published my first peer reviewed article from my PhD only in 2008.

I was offered a job as a researcher at Tufts University in January 2009 and was later appointed as an Assistant Professor in 2010. Initially, I did not apply for a job at Tufts but was invited to work as a researcher by Antonio Donini, who was a Senior Researcher there. It was not a tenure track job although my contract involved both research and teaching. It allowed me to come to Nepal regularly to see my parents. I taught a couple of courses at Tufts 'Gender, Culture and Conflict' which I co-taught with another colleague Dyan Mazurana and taught a qualitative research methods on my own.

Teaching at Tufts, to students at Flethcer and Freidman schools was rewarding. Tufts's Fletcher school

was a premier institution as the first graduate school of international affairs in the US and the Freidman school had a similar reputation in health and nutritional sciences; most students went and worked as senior diplomats, senior officials in the state department, UN bureaucrats and NGO workers. It was an expensive private university. People who taughted and studied at Tufts had a clear focus on public service or public engagement. They had an interest in real-world problems and challenges, and saw their research, teaching and learning as a part of their passion for public service. Edinburgh on the other hand, at least when I started there, was very much like a traditional British university with a focus on academic teaching and learning. Of course, there have been significant changes in the UK funding landscape in the last decade or so where there is a renewed interest in the role of academia in addressing global challenges.

I did not have tenure at Tufts, and I was always moving from one research project to another with very little time for writing academic outputs. My primary appointment was at Feinstein International Centre, a small research unit where I had excellent opportunities to do a number of research projects in Nepal and beyond. In Edinburgh, the job was permanent, and I had PhD students and other major responsibilities. It also helped me to get back to academic writing and scholarship. When I got notified of the job in Edinbugh, which was a new position as Lecturer in South Asia and International Development, I got in touch with people involved in the search committee. As a former student, I knew quite a lot about Edinburgh, which probably put me in a stronger position. Although the pay was not comparable to the salary at Tufts, the prospect of a permanent job in Edinburgh to start a new programme in South Asia and International Development attracted me. Once I got an offer from Edinburgh, Tufts did make a counter offer but I had already made my mind.

Question 5: You have conducted research on topics such as 'Health of South Asian Migrants', 'Migrant Workers' Death, Injury, and Ill-treatment', 'Problems of Labor Migration' and 'Labor Mobility, Vulnerability and Social Transformation in Nepal'. What are the key findings of these studies, and what should be done to ensure justice and a dignified life for Nepali migrant workers?

Answer: I have maintained a steady interest in the question of migrant labour and their suffering. Why do people aspire to migrate when they often end up in exploitative situations? I was exposed to the question of labour migration while growing up in Palpa. I knew there were people queuing up in banks to withdraw their pension, there were pension offices for Indian and British Army, offices of Indian and British Army welfare and occasional sights of recruitment/training. I knew that people ran away from the villages and went to India for 'wanderings' or 'for work'. When I went to study in Mumbai, I got exposed to the extent of labour migration from Nepal and India, including discrimination faced by Nepali migrants during the border crossing, rail travel or in India. The racialised labels like *kancha* and *bahadur* were considered normal in India. Later, when I returned to Nepal after my MA, I was hired to do some work by Care Nepal on HIV and STI in far-western Nepal. This work gave further insights on the extent of labour out-migration from far-western Nepal to Mumbai and other parts of India, and the risks associated with it. Later, I was also hired by FHI to work in Mumbai with Nepali migrants there. These experiences offered insights on the costs of migration to migrant bodies and to those left behind. When I came to do my PhD in Edinburgh, I had planned to study the politics of local/ community development in Nepal. Within two months of staying and researching in Edinburgh, I learned through readings that labour migration was becoming a key part of people's livelihoods and there wasn't much attention paid to this phenomenon. Two papers on social change in Nepal that I read within the first month of being in Edinburgh, one by Blaikie et al. on 20 years of change since the book Nepal in Crisis and another reflective piece by anthropologist Macfarlane on 30 years of change shaped by interest on labour migration.

For my PhD, I conducted fieldwork in Palpa, and then travelled with a group of young migrants who went to Mumbai, and I lived with them. I also looked at the culture of migration in the middle hills of Nepal. I knew that economic pressures were critical in shaping these migrations, but I found that money was not the only reason why Nepali men were leaving the villages in search of work opportunities. I argued that it was a gendered and socio-cultural process, and I framed men's migration around the question of masculinities. There was a culture of migration. Discrimination and exploitation were part of the journey. I show how border crossing had a bodily impact on migrant workers and how it transformed a Nepali man into a classed and racialised labour/worker. Nepali migrant workers' exposure to ill-health was not due to some behavioural issues but was determined by unequal effects of the political economy of migration. All of this is actively produced. Thus, it is not an accident that Nepali migrant workers are exploited.

Question 6: In 2018, your book Crossing the Border to India: Youth, Migration and Masculinities in Nepal was published by Temple University Press. What are the key findings of this book and what are the responses of readers and reviewers?

Answer: This was a book based in part on my PhD thesis. As I was juggling with work, I was not able to turn my thesis into a book for a decade since I submitted my PhD. Initially, I wanted to publish this book with another press, but I could not deliver the manuscript on time due to

other research commitments while I was working at Tufts. Later, I met Craig Jeffery at a conference, a series editor for the global youth series at Temple University Press, who expressed an interest in my work. It encouraged me to submit my manuscript to their press. This book ethnographically shows how the history, culture and changing political economy of the middle hills of Nepal shaped the desire, the agency and the gendered and class-related experiences of young male migrant workers from poor households in rural Nepal shaping what I have called 'the culture of migration' in the hills of Nepal. It has been enthusiastically reviewed in six journals where the reviewers have called it 'a sensitive ethnography', 'evocative ethnographic analyses' 'important contribution to the scholarship on migration, development, and masculinities' and 'fully recommendable, both for those interested in migration and masculinity studies'. `The book tells the story of how cheap labour is systematically produced and how border crossing is a key moment in producing precarity based on gender, class and race. It also viewed migrant workers not just as workers in Marxist sense but also consumers and urged scholars to pay attention to their consumption which offers some explanation for a steady flow of labour migration from Nepal despite persistant exploitation. A cheaper edition of the book was later published by Bloomsbury in India in 2019. Earlier this year, Temple University Press brought out a paperback edition of this book. I am glad that I was able to document this and put it out, as Nepali migrants in India are largely forgotten in scholarly and policy debates.

Question 7: In 2021, your book Political Economy of Social Change and Development in Nepal was published by Bloomsbury Academic. What are the main conclusions of this book and what are the responses of readers and reviewers?

Answer: This book is based on long term ethnographic research, where I offer empirically rich accessible, multidisciplinary and integrated analysis of the political economy of social change and development in Nepal. Focusing on local discourses, experiences and expectations of transformations, my work draws our attention to how powerful historical processes are experienced and negotiated in Nepal and assesses how these may, at the same time, produce ideas of equality, human rights and citizenship while also generating new forms of precarity. Reviews include 'a deeply insightful analysis of Nepal's complex transformation which transcends disciplinary boundaries…the most integrative, synoptic and interdisciplinary account of these changes and paradoxes published to date, 'greatly valuable provocation… a bold and tidy review of the social and political impact of seventy years of development in Nepal' and 'an ambitious attempt to provide an overall integrated theoretical framework for the broader analysis of political, social and economic change in Nepal'. Based on my field research, this was my attempt to write an accessible book on the political economy of development and social change in Nepal.

Question 8: Currently, you are Co-Director of the Centre for South Asian Studies, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, UK. What are your key roles and responsibilities in this position? How do you assess the future of such Centre for knowledge production and dissemination?

Answer: I have been Co-Director of the Centre for the last three years. Edinburgh has a long tradition of study in South Asia. My responsibility is to manage the centre, which works with a vibrant group of PhD students, and convene courses in South Asia that we teach to our undergraduate and postgraduate students. We run fortnightly seminar series and annual workshops and lectures. We have a vibrant intellectual community at CSAS where we have students and scholars working in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. We run a PhD programme in South Asian Studies, which attracts large number of applicants.

Area studies have come under attack for its colonial origins and there has been a decline in funding. CSAS in Edinburgh brings together a group of highly reputable academic colleagues from across the University's subjects and schools, including Social Anthropology; Art; History; Literature, Languages and Cultures; Law; Politics and International Relations; Religious Studies; Sociology; Veterinary Studies; ; Engineering; Geosciences; and Medicine to provide a dynamic core of academics that have a keen interest and expertise on South Asia.

Question 9: You are the General Secretary of the Britain Nepal Academic Council (BNAC). What scholarly activities does the BNAC conduct, and how can it collaborate with Nepali scholars for the mutual benefits of the scholars working in Nepal and the UK?

Answer: BNAC is a small academic organisation. I have been associated with BNAC since my student days, and was elected as its General Secretary in 2022. It organises annual lectures, annual conferences called Nepal Study Days, offers PhD dissertation prize and supports/co-organises the annual conference on Nepal and Himalayan studies in Kathmandu. We also organize ad hoc events. Nepali scholars and academic institutions are welcome to collaborate with BNAC. Many of the BNAC executive members are Nepali academics working in the UK. Anyone who would like to collaborate with BNAC could contact me or any other officials, we are always keen to collaborate with students and scholars working in/on Nepal.

Question 10: You have collaborated on numerous research projects with universities and academic

non-governmental organizations in Nepal. Could you describe the challenges and opportunities encountered while working with these institutions? Additionally, what are your suggestions for enhancing collaboration between universities and non-governmental organizations in Nepal?

Answer: It is impossible to carry out research on your own without collaborating with partners in Nepal. All research is collaborative whether we explicitly acknowledge it or not. We have to depend on other people's labour and support to conduct research. Generally, I have had a very positive experience in collaborating with Nepali organisations and individuals. I have found that research collaboration with smaller organisations in Nepal is much easier and swifter than with large and complex university departments, which seems to be reflected in international research collaborations we have seen in Nepal. I have made efforts in collaborating for research with academics and officials at Tribhuwan University and Kathmandu University for large research projects, but these did not move ahead as planned for various practical reasons. For instance, it would be great to work closely with colleagues and students at TU, which has students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. We need to remember that these collaborations are made by individuals through sustained engagements. Academics tend to collaborate with people they trust and with whom they have established working relationships; these collaborations can be exclusionary. These collaborations may end up developing like clubs. These collaborations do not just happen; they need to be initiated, developed and sustained over a period of time by the individuals involved. I see, there is a vibrant scene of research collaborations emerging in Nepal, leading to scholarship, publications and research capacity. As long as these research collaborations reflect ethical and equitable partnerships, they should be welcomed and celebrated, which may not always be the case.

Question 11: You have been the Co-editor of the HIMALAYA journal since 2020. What academic and technical challenges do you face in improving the journal, and how are you addressing them?

Answer: Running a fully open-access journal is a challenge. At HIMALAYA, we don't just edit HIMALAYA, we are also a production house that designs and publishes it (along with printing and fulfillment) with limited resources and labour. Getting a steady supply of quality submissions can be a challenge. Sometimes early career researchers working in the region may be looking to publish in disciplinary journals as that may offer better prospects for job and career advancement. Finding peer reviewers is a constant challenge, which is reflective of how busy everyone is and journal peer review is a free labour. This tends to delay processing of the articles. Printing and shipping physical copies throw its logistical challenges. HIMALAYA journal has been the flagship journal for Association of Nepal and Himalayan Studies, and has been supported by voluntary labour of many people. We have tried to professionalise the journal and have just moved to print-on-demand for print copies.

Questions 12: The number of students in social sciences is decreasing in Nepal. What advice would you give to young researchers and students who are just starting their careers in social sciences?

Answer: When I was doing my own BA and MA, I think anthropology and sociology programmes in Nepal attracted a significant number of students, which was due to employment prospects in NGOs and the development sector at that time. I have read recent reports on concerns regarding decreasing number of students studying social sciences in Nepal. Is it because of diminished prospects for jobs in the NGO and development sector or because the jobs in this sector are precarious/unstable, or is it reflective of broader shifts in the higher education sector or sociology/anthropology education in Nepal? We know that there are only limited secured jobs and most jobs are temporary and often based on precarious contracts.

Question 13: Social sciences are often the least preferred subjects in Nepal, and the importance of these fields is rarely acknowledged by political leaders and bureaucrats. What are your thoughts on the future of social science, particularly anthropology and sociology, in Nepal? What suggestions do you have for improving the status of social sciences in the country?

Answer: Social science research needs to be adequately funded. In Nepal, we hear people say we have limited research funding available. Yet, this should not deter social science research and scholarly activities in Nepal. There is already a vibrant social science research culture in Nepal as reflected in research projects, publications, seminars and conferences, but they are primarily based in Kathmandu and limited to a few private (or non-governmental) organisations that are run by a few people and their close networks/clubs. First, I see there is quite a lot of collaborative social science research going on in Nepal which involves partnerships with outside universities/ research institutions. This is great but we must also support the development of research cultures inside University departments involving students. It is encouraging to see that TU's Department of Sociology has started a new journal and I see on social media that occasional talks are organised at Sociology and Anthropology Departments at TU. The future of social science research depends on how well we all are able to cultivate vibrant research cultures in Universities and colleges. I can see that there is momentum at TU and I think this can be very much

supported by those from within and outside. Second, there is a significant amount of contract research done within Nepal through research consultancies or by several NGOs, government departments and other institutions. We should also look beyond Kathmandu and the usual social science research institutions when we talk about the future of social sciences in Nepal.

Question 14: As a reader of the Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology, what specific suggestions do you have for the Editorial Team? How can we continue to improve this journal, and which areas should we focus on to enhance the quality and visibility of the published papers?

Answer: Publishing an open-access journal and sustaining it is extremely challenging. I don't know if I have specific suggestions but I think it is worth asking: what problem does this journal solve for authors, and what are the comparative advantages of publishing in this journal as opposed to others? Is it about the speed of publication i.e. time between submission and final publication? Is it about its open access? Is it about no article processing charge? Is it about the prestige that comes with publishing in this journal? If the journal can reach out to prospective authors with the benefits of full open-access peer-reviewed publishing, I think this would help encourage submissions of original research articles. It is worth asking emerging and established scholars to submit papers to the journal. Unfortunately, as is often the case in academia, this may also be about personal and professional networks. Publishing content that contributes to ongoing key academic debates might also attract increased attention and visibility.

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