

South Asia in the 21st Century: *Explorations in Multidisciplinary Methodology*

Proposal for a multidisciplinary Nordic Summer University cluster on South Asia. By applying a multidisciplinary methodology and focusing on South Asia's political and economical change, our aim is to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the subcontinent in the 21st century.

Over the last few decades, the interest in South Asian societies and cultures has grown dramatically in our part of the world. And interaction between European countries and South Asian counterparts have increasingly underscored the need to acquire better and more comprehensive knowledge of the countries in South Asia. This is needed as economic possibilities develop, migration is picking up speed, ecological disasters may be looming, conflicts persist and political changes are taking place. Against this backdrop, there has been a notable growth in Nordic South Asia related research, both within specific disciplines and within South Asian area studies. However, so far the activities have been scattered throughout the region. The proposed Nordic Summer University cluster will facilitate a more coordinated effort and create a much needed common base for Nordic South Asia research.

European theories of human action and meaning, encompassed in distinct disciplines, are developed out of historical experiences particular to European areas and cultures. Scholars working on South Asia have achieved some explanatory success in applying analytic concepts from conventional academic disciplines, though experiences vary from problem to problem. Often scholars find that they have to rework some analytic concepts and develop new ones appropriate to social and political structures indigenous to the subcontinent. Doing research on South Asia can thus be frustrating, because one cannot rely easily on conventional European canons of thought, but at the same time rewarding as scholars are truly pushing the intellectual frontiers.

Modern South Asia is a result of fairly unique long-term development trajectories that are remote from the experience of most people in Europe. However, like elsewhere, political and economical changes are structuring other transformations in the region—reinforcing existing social structures related to religion, caste and ethnicity etc. On its own, no academic discipline is equipped to take all of these variables into account and hence to better explain and comprehend the ongoing transformation we need the disciplines to inform each other. Economic, social, political, historical and cultural analysis contributes important aspects to our knowledge of South Asia, but it *does not* tell the full story of the region. Only a multidisciplinary approach and methodology can cover enough aspects to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics and role played by the subcontinent in the 21st century.

On this background, the Nordic Summer University cluster will focus on the interaction between political, cultural, economical and ecological developments in South Asia. Each of the topically very different workshops are organized so that the specific issues that they address are related to a more general level concerned with political and economical developments in South Asia. In this way, the purpose of the cluster's workshops is to

unlock the intellectual challenges of South Asia and study what the region can teach us about the challenges of the 21st century.

Below is an outline of each workshop to be organized under the auspices of the Nordic Summer University.

1st Workshop (winter 08/09): Democratic Values and Political Practices in South Asia

Stig Toft Madsen, David Hansen and Arild Ruud

Democracy has considerable temporal depth in South Asia. The British Empire in the region initiated elections to town and district boards at the end of the 19th century, while Independence brought opportunities for universal suffrage.¹ India receives attention as the largest democracy in the world and as the developing country with one of the best records, since its independence, in carrying out regular elections to state and national assemblies. Recently, the experiment of democracy has been extended to Bhutan under royal tutelage, while in Nepal the outcome of civil war and spells of autocratic rule may be the abolition of monarchy and a return to a more broad-based democracy. In February 2008, Pakistan reverted to democracy after eight years of military tutelage. Meanwhile in Afghanistan, the king has returned together with a severely challenged form of democracy under NATO. Such developments – and those undoubtedly to follow – call out for attention and analysis.

However, elections do not necessarily produce good governance and the peaceful resolution of political conflicts in a country and it is clear that we need to pay attention to the social, economic and historical contexts in which elections take place in parts of the world unfamiliar to them.

Europeans and North Americans, however, enter into epistemological issues of a complicated nature when they try to unravel responses to elections in South Asia. The customary division of knowledge in disciplines in Western universities may produce reasonably successful methods for understanding and handling problems of conflict and governance in Western societies. However, it has long been dawning on many scholars of South Asia that pursuing an understanding of political rationality in this part of the world often requires strenuous efforts of multidisciplinary cooperation. Here, the sphere of the religious overlaps seamlessly with the political, the political cannot be separated from the social, and boundaries between state and society are blurred. These observations began to emerge in the field of the cultural anthropology of South Asia in the 1970s², moved into historical studies of the area and have recently been employed in studies of contemporary politics, on local and state levels.³

¹ John M. Richardson Jr. and S.W.R. de A. Samarasinghe, eds., *Decmocratisation in South Asia: The First Fifty Years*, Candy, 1998.

² See, for example, Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, “The South Indian Temple: Authority, Honor and Redistribution”, in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (NS), Vol. 10, No. 2, 1976, pp. 187-211.

³ As in C.J. Ruller and Véronique Bénéï, eds., *The Everyday State and Society in Modern India*, New Delhi, 2000; Arild Engelsen Ruud, *Poetics of Village Politics: The Making of West Bengal’s Rural Communism*, New Delhi, 2003; and Pamela Price, “Changing Meanings of Authority in Contemporary Rural India”, in *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 2006, pp. 301-316.

Hence, this workshop will focus on institutions and values which appear as salient in understanding political behaviour in electoral processes in South Asia. The questions here are many. When, for example, does political charisma outweigh government performance as voters make their decisions? Under what circumstances do voters believe that the state could offer better administration? Do elections exacerbate cleavages between social/socio-religious groups? Has there been an increase in physical violence attending the onset of elections? Under what circumstances have electoral processes in South Asia resulted in the peaceful management of major conflicts? What meanings are attributed to “the democratic” in different parts of South Asia?

Other people who are interested in contributing: Peter Andersen and Jørgen Dige Petersen.

2nd Workshop (summer 09): South Asian Migration and diaspora

Igor Kotin, Peter Andersen, Knut A. Jacobsen and Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger

Various patterns of migration have created different South Asian diaspora communities in the Africa, the Caribbean, North America and Europe. However, in Europe, especially, the research environment has mainly focused on migrant’s economic integration into the host community’s labour market and several comprehensive theories on minority and diaspora communities have been formulated⁴.

Many of these theories have to a large extent left out the cultural and religious dimension of migration and diaspora formation. Hence, it is the aim of this workshop to investigate how culture and the organisation of culture construct various aspects of migration, integration and diaspora formation.⁵

Methodologically the workshop will focus on case studies of migrant communities and the interaction between the diasporas and the “home” communities. Central to these issues is the question of scale: when migrant communities become sufficiently large their members may find themselves capable of choosing between different identities such as citizen of the host country, South Asian national, a South Asian ethnicity or other specific identity markers such as castes, religion, fundamentalism etc. This creates an entire new ballgame in relation to dynamics of integration and /or segregation that call for further analysis.

The workshop will utilize recent Nordic qualitative and quantitative studies to approach these issues and determine to what extent fragmentation of migrant communities leads to integration or segregation in the receiving communities⁶. Also, the workshop will try to determine a connection between fragmentation and integration with respect to religious,

⁴ E.g. Michael Banton, *Racial and ethnic competition*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

⁵ Pratap Kumar and Knut A. Jacobsen eds., 2004, *South Asians in the Diaspora: Histories and Religious Tradition*, ed. by; Knut A. Jacobsen and Selva J. Raj, *South Asian Christian Diaspora: Invisible Diaspora in Europe and North America*, forthcoming 2008.

⁶ E.g. Garbi Schmidt & Vibeke Jakobsen, *20 år i Danmark*, København: SFI, 2000.

sectarian, democratic, and gender positions. Finally, the workshop will also consider how different policies in the Nordic countries affect the integration of South Asians.

The workshop is expected to result in a thematic issue of a journal or an edited volume.

Other people who are interested in contributing: Tina Jensen and Garbi Schmidt.

3rd Workshop (winter 09/10): Environmental Challenges, Politics and Food Production in South Asia

Tor Halfdan Aase and Pamela Price

The global 'food stress' is presently on the rise. Prices on staples like rice, wheat, and maize are rocketing as a combined outcome of increased demand for meat in fast growing economies, record high petroleum prices and concomitant expensive chemical fertilizers, and transfer of crops from food to bio-fuels. Larger farmers who have a surplus to sell may benefit from this situation; but small peasants and the urban poor may suffer severely.

Climate change is predicted to add to the stress in the near future. A recent study estimates that India may experience a 30% decrease in its agricultural production by 2080, and other countries which receive a large part of their irrigation water from Himalayan glaciers are not going to fare much better. Gloomy prophecies like this one have been made earlier without coming true, but still, the very prediction may be an impetus to do something about the situation. In South Asia, two main positions can be discerned in the debate over agriculture. Firstly, there are those who see mostly positive effects of the Green Revolution and favour a 'Gene Revolution', allowing for development of new high yielding crop varieties which are more drought resistant etc. The other position argues that sustainable agriculture should be more 'ecological' ('ever-green') or 'holistic', relying on local resources rather than on industrially produced fertilizers, patented seeds, and an ever expanding network of irrigation canals and tube-wells.

In this workshop, we intend to look into the question of food production under changing conditions in South Asia. Those conditions are presently characterised by *uncertainty*, since we do not have models for future climate change on the local level as yet, and since we do not know what will be the position of South Asian countries in the coming WTO negotiations of world food trade liberalisation. In such a situation of uncertainty, the vital question to ask is how *flexible* South Asian farming systems are in terms of adapting to changing conditions of production, whatever those changes may be. Since flexibility relates to a wide range of topics like labour (gender and caste), land entitlement, environmental conditions, pricing policy, and new technology, we invite participants who focus on various aspects of land based food production.

The flexibility of farming systems must be addressed with reference to the flexibility and political capacity of the state in adjusting its focus toward agricultural sectors in South Asian nations. National and provincial political elites in South Asia have tended to neglect agriculture in favour of industrial development, the demands of urban dwellers,

and military expenditure.⁷ Those funds which are allocated for development often do not reach their original target. In India, for example, recent studies illustrate that between 75 to 85 per cent of the funds which are designated for the rural poor are siphoned off by politicians, rich farmers and bureaucrats for other purposes.⁸ 80 per cent of the farmers in India have holdings of fewer than 5 acres of land; these holdings constitute more than 50 per cent of cultivable land. Resolution of the new challenges in food production, then, will require political attention to the needs of the farmers by state and national governments in all of South Asia. One of the goals of the workshop is to analyse strategies for research into the politics of food production. To this end the organizers of the workshop will invite participation not only from rural sociologists/anthropologists and human geographers, but also scholars working on state and national politics as well as political capacity in South Asia.

Other people who are interested in contributing: Pernille Gooch, Arne Åkeman, Hans Blomkvist, Ulrika Møller.

4th Workshop (summer 10): Religion and conflict in South Asia

Stig Toft Madsen, David Hansen and Peter B. Andersen

Religious violence continues to be coupled to political conflicts in South Asia challenging the writ of governments, the capacity of the police, the armed forces and the intelligence services, and the values and survival strategies of people at large. This applies not only to Pakistan and Afghanistan, but to India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as well. Granted the frequency, scale and impact of religiously inspired violence in South Asia, the region offers itself as a “laboratory” for a renewed examination of religious violence in a global perspective. On that basis, the workshop will ask: What are the lessons that students of religious conflict may derive from South Asia?

The workshop will also take stock of the capacity of religious movements to moderate virulent expressions of faith. Within Islam, Sufism has often been seen as a moderating factor with its rich blend of Hindu, Buddhist and Zoroastrian culture. However, the question is how such counter-movements fare in today’s South Asia?

Religious violence may manifest itself in acts of terror and in communal riots with or without the connivance of the state apparatus. Such acts are often localized and most people learn about them through the media. Hence, in addition to the above, the workshop invites contributions on the role of the media in reporting conflicts and will investigate conflict journalists’ work in South Asia, as well as what we may learn from them and vice-versa.

⁷Paul Brass argues this point in *The Politics of India Since Independence*, second edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, Part III, “Political Economy”.

⁸ A summary of this research is found in: Steven I. Wilkinson, Explaining Changing Patterns of Party-Voter Linkages in India” in Herbert Kitschelt and Steven I. Wilkinson, ed., *Patrons, Clients and Policies: Patterns of Democratic Accountability and Political Competition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 110-140.

5th Workshop (winter 10/11): Releasing the Indian tiger – economical and political implications globally and regionally of the opening of the Indian economy

Michael W. Hansen and Anthony D'Costa

In recent years, India has experienced a tremendous economic change, with very high growth rates and fundamental changes in the industrial and commercial fabric of Indian society. India has become a pivotal sourcing platform within knowledge intensive industries and foreign direct investment (FDI), inward as well as outward, is rapidly picking up. In short, an increasingly self-confident India is asserting its role in the global economy. These developments have taken place simultaneously with the phasing out of import substitution strategies and the gradual opening of the Indian economy toward international trade and foreign direct investment. Tariffs have been reduced and trade regimes liberalized. Foreign direct investment measures, such as ownership and local content requirements or sector restrictions have been removed or rolled back.

But has growing openness in terms of reform of the rules and institutions governing trade and investment really been a decisive factor in the recent rise of the Indian economy or is it mainly a result of internal reforms and dynamics, e.g. infrastructure and education policy, privatization efforts or industrial development policies? And if openness has been important, how has this affected the capacity of various actors within the Indian economy to deal with development challenges? More broadly, what are the implications of more outward oriented development for Indian industry and commerce, for politics and democracy, and for equity and distribution?

This workshop will take up these issues by asking questions such as what are the drivers and implications of internationalization of Indian Multinational companies (MNC)? What is the role of inward investment (and outsourcing) in generating economic growth, upgrading Indian supplier firms and providing access for Indian firms to world markets? What are the relations between western MNCs and India? How does MNCs' investment influence political development in India? What are the implications for knowledge industries in the North due to the growing mobility of Indian talent? What are the challenges and opportunities for South Asia due to the rise of the Indian economy (e.g. spill over effects, competition for Internet Communication Technology, South-South FDI, regional economic and political cooperation)? And in general, how may the rise of the Indian economy change global capitalism as well as theories of global capitalism?

The workshop is envisioned to result in an edited volume.

Other people who are interested in contributing: Jørgen Dige Petersen.

6 Workshop (summer 11): Workshop X

Preliminarily: Sidsel Hansson and Catarina Kinnvall, Anna Lindberg, Igor Kotin, Sirpa Tenhunen, Sanjiv Prakash and Steen Widman.

The cluster wishes to keep one workshop open in order to allow for some flexibility in the setup and the possibility of picking up on topics that may materialize during the three year period.