

## **Cultivating Futures: Ethnographies of Alternative Agricultures in South Asian Landscapes of Crisis**

Heidelberg, 12.–14. December 2013

Is there hope for South Asian farmers? What alternatives emerge in response to agro-ecological crisis in South Asia? The workshop “Cultivating Futures” invited ethnographers of South and Southeast Asian agriculture to debate the cultural politics of alternative agricultures in the region. Hosted by Heidelberg University’s Cluster of Excellence “Asia and Europe in a Global Context,” the interdisciplinary workshop brought together anthropologists, geographers, rural sociologists as well as practitioners to present ethnographic case studies of alternative agricultures with a focus on transcultural dynamics in the interplay of knowledge, technologies, power and political economy.

In his keynote lecture Glenn Davis Stone (Washington University) focused on the contested notion of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) that is central to the revival of alternative agricultures. He talked about power, experiment and knowledge in Indian agriculture and discussed how the advance of Genetically Modified (GM) Crops is marginalizing and devaluing farmers’ knowledge systems. Stone argued that state agronomy and the introduction of GM seed varieties reduce the “trialability” of new seeds by farmers.

The workshop started with a session on “Political Economy, Science and Knowledge.” In his introductory paper to the workshop Daniel Münster (Heidelberg) elaborated on the renewed interest in studying agriculture at the intersection of ethnographies of farming, the state, science and development. He then focused on two central issues of the workshop, the notion of “alternatives” (as normative and relational) and the possibilities of alternative economies within the global food regime and, secondly, the notion of “crisis” and its most drastic image of farmers’ suicides. He called upon social theorists and practitioners alike to bridge registers of critique from the social to the ecological and the cultural. The following presentation by Barbara Harriss-White (Oxford) focused on expert and situated knowledge in the context of technology options available for rice production in India. By applying Multi-Criteria Mapping, she analyzed trade-offs between the environment and agricultural production in three case studies. Harriss-White brought in the subject of the often frictionous relationship between expert and indigenous knowledge, which continued to be a running thread throughout the course of the remaining sessions.

The second session on “Agrarian Innovation and Rural Uncertainty” featured presentations by Andrew Flachs (Washington University) and Shambu Prasad (Xavier Institute of Management). Flachs spoke on the skilling (and de-skilling) processes from his ongoing fieldwork among organic and GMO cotton farmers in Telangana (India). He focused on the question of seed choice and cultural notions of hope and expectation among farmers confronted with fundamental uncertainty. Prasad presented a “technographic” account of agency and innovation in the System of Rice

Intensification (SRI). He argued that innovation in agricultural science and technology should be decentered (from urban research centers) and recognized in the adaptive work of farmers struggling to incorporate sustainable technologies.

The following session entitled “Heritage Alternatives” focused on the revival of traditional agriculture. Sunita Rao (Vanastree Seed Saving Collective) reported on seed saving initiatives in forest home gardens in the Western Ghats in India and painted a vivid picture of the challenges of maintaining homestead gardens in a landscape of capitalist cash-cropping. Saeed Haldule (Heidelberg) discussed recent changes in food and agricultural legislations in India especially and their implications for “seed networks” in Maharashtra. In the final session on day one, Peter Vandergeest (York University) spoke about the many social lives of organic agriculture and food in Southeast Asia. He argued that in contrast to the situation in South Asia, alternative agriculture here is not so much a response to agrarian crisis but mostly market-driven and has evolved from “alternative development.” The third day of the workshop started with a session on “Agrarian Future and Crisis.” Graeme McRae (Massey University) approached these issues by comparing agrarian landscapes of “less crisis” in Uttarakhand. Focusing on basmati rice farmers, he illustrated the tensions, interplays and dynamic balances between corporate, neoliberal farming and alternative futures drafted by local communities and NGOs. Daniel Münster presented his research on alternative agricultures after the neoliberal crisis in Kerala, India. He proposed the notion of “agronomical pluralism,” depicting a situation in which small-scale farmers need to choose from among a variety of competing agronomical systems at a moment of uncertainty and crisis. The next session focused on “Certified Organic Agriculture.” Julia Poerting (Heidelberg) argued for a focus on networks of actors and institutions and on knowledge production in the context of certified organic agriculture in Pakistan. An analysis of organic rose production and fertilizer manufacturing shows the entanglement of markets and agricultural universities. Shaila Seshia Galvin (Williams College) presented her work on in the making of markets for specific crops Uttarakhand’s (India) organic agriculture. She illustrated the difficulties experienced by farmers in accessing the market and the cultivation of consumer demands by companies and organizations.

In the last session entitled “Agrarian Paradigm Shifts” Rajeswari Raina (New Delhi) highlighted the marginalization of rainfed agriculture in state and development policies in India and critically analyzed the corresponding policy and science discourses. Dominic Glover (Wageningen) examined the history of SRI and critically discussed the framing of it as a rediscovered agrarian alternative. Each day of the workshop was concluded by open discussions which were facilitated by the invited discussants Birgit Müller (CNRS, Paris) and Christian Strümpell (Heidelberg).

The workshop was organized by Daniel Münster, Saeed Haldule and Julia Poerting, members of the Junior Research Group "Agrarian Alternatives": [www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/research/c-knowledge-systems/c15-agrarian-alternatives.html](http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/research/c-knowledge-systems/c15-agrarian-alternatives.html)

Julia Poerting and Daniel Münster

## Methoden der empirischen Asienforschung

Workshop der DGA-Nachwuchsgruppe, Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg, 17.–19. Januar 2014

Die Nachwuchsgruppe Asienforschung der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Asienkunde e.V. veranstaltete vom 17. bis 19. Januar 2014 einen Workshop zu Methoden der empirischen Asienforschung an der Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg. Insgesamt 40 Nachwuchswissenschaftlerinnen und Nachwuchswissenschaftler aus verschiedenen Disziplinen, Qualifikationsstufen und regionalen Kontexten diskutierten lebhaft über methodologische Probleme und wissenschaftspolitische Herausforderungen empirischer Asienforschung.

Der Workshop begann am Freitagabend mit einer öffentlichen Podiumsdiskussion zu Asienforschung zwischen Area Studies und Disziplinen mit Prof. Doris Fischer (Würzburg), Mikko Huotari und Prof. Nicola Spakowski (beide Freiburg), moderiert von Elena Klorer (DGA-Nachwuchsgruppe). Deutlich wurde dabei die Vielfalt institutioneller Konstellationen: das Verhältnis von Area Studies als gegenwartsbezogener, sozialwissenschaftlicher Forschung, zu den Disziplinen unterscheidet sich maßgeblich danach, ob mit letzteren die klassischen philologischen Fächer gemeint sind oder die systematischen Disziplinen wie die Politikwissenschaft, Soziologie, oder VWL. Eigentlich haben wir es also mit einem Dreiklang zu tun, bei dem auf der einen Seite eine Überbetonung partikularer Einzigartigkeit asiatischer Gesellschaften und auf der anderen Seite ein blinder Transfer vermeintlich universalen, tatsächlich oft westlicher Modelle drohen. Das Podium war sich weitgehend einig, dass Asienforschung nur gelingen kann, wenn sie sowohl regional als auch disziplinär stark ist; die besonderen Herausforderungen dieses Anforderungsprofils für den Nachwuchs wurden kontrovers diskutiert und mit vielen Anekdoten untermauert.

Im Verlauf des Samstags widmeten sich einzelne Arbeitsgruppen spezifischen Problemlagen vor dem Hintergrund eigener Forschungserfahrung. Am Vormittag lag der Fokus zunächst auf epistemologischen Fragen, die in der Methodenausbildung häufig von einer Überbetonung konkreter Techniken überlagert werden, für eine oft interdisziplinäre und qua Definition außereuropäische Asienforschung jedoch zentrale Bedeutung gewinnen. Dr. Christian von Lübke und Mikko Huotari (beide Freiburg) leiteten daher parallele Arbeitsgruppen zu Vergleichslogiken bzw. Konzeptbildung, bevor am Nachmittag in drei weiteren Arbeitsgruppen konkrete Herausforderungen für Ethnographie (Eva-Maria Sandkühler, Freiburg), Interview-