

Conference Reports

21st European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies

Bonn, 26–29 July 2010

From July 26 to July 29, 2010, the University of Bonn hosted the 21st European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies (ECMSAS). The ECMSAS is the biannual academic conference of the European Association of South Asian Studies (EASAS) and one of the most important events of its kind worldwide. The scope of the ECMSAS is particularly broad, bringing together scholars from many different South Asia-related fields of study and making it the largest gathering of such researchers and experts in Europe. Since panels were scheduled parallel to each other, hard choices frequently had to be made. Overall, some 350 papers were presented in more than 40 panels, only a very small number of which can be described in this conference report.

In his opening remarks, Jürgen Fohrmann, rector of the University of Bonn, urged participants to “go beyond prejudices” and “see the real India”. Konrad Klaus, director of the host institution, the Institute of Oriental and Asian Studies, University of Bonn, pointed out the special role of Bonn in the development of German indology, particularly emphasizing the interdisciplinary character of the conference. Even a brief glance at the panel schedule confirms this: Topics included, just to name a few, “Rethinking Bhakti in North India”, “The History of Drugs and Alcohol in Modern South Asia”, “The Emerging Middle Class in India”, “Modern Languages in South Asia”, and “Reproductive Tourism in India”.

The keynote address was delivered by the renowned Indian historian Sudhir Chandra. His lecture, entitled “Two ‘Failed’ Heroes: Understanding Modern South Asia”, drew comparisons between the last days of the lives of M.K. Gandhi and M.A. Jinnah. It connected their struggles to create unity and peace in India and Pakistan to the question of communal violence on the subcontinent today. Prof. Chandra’s plea for self-examination and individual moral responsibility was illustrated by some of his personal experiences in the early 1990s and during the Gujarat violence in 2002. A second keynote speech, the Ambedkar lecture, was given by Sukhdeo Thorat (Chairman, University Grants Commission, New Delhi). His lecture entitled “Identity,

Social Exclusion and Deprived Groups: Search for Inclusive Society in Contemporary International Context” highlighted the contributions of B.R. Ambedkar to the advancement of low-caste untouchables in India. Prof. Thorat went on to point out how discriminatory mechanisms still persist in contemporary society in India and elsewhere. Remedies are hard to find: The problem of social exclusion can only be solved by a “socially inclusive policy” that embraces social, educational, and economic empowerment of deprived groups as well as general equal opportunity policies.

Naturally, the main focus of most of the conference’s panels was India. Aspects of the colonial history of India were the subject of many presentations, given not only by historians but also by scholars from many other research fields such as literature and cultural studies, linguistics, sociology, or anthropology. This interdisciplinary approach was seen for instance in the panel on “Indian Satire in the Period of First Modernity”. Nitin Sinha (Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin) presented a paper on “Rangila Rasool: Satirizing Muhammad, Disciplining Hindus, 1870s to 1920s” while Prabhat Kumar (University of Heidelberg) took up the issue of “Satire, Modernity and Public Sphere in the Late 19th Century India”. Hans Harder (South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg) gave an interesting presentation on “Colonial Satire in South Asia” where he distinguished pre-colonial from colonial satire. As from the 19th century, India witnessed a “boom of satirical text production” with new formats and new forms of intertextuality. Interestingly, the targets of such satire were not primarily the colonial masters but Indians themselves. According to Harder, satire during that era represented a new self-observation and a new self-reflexivity of the emerging Indian middle classes.

The international dimension of colonial history in India was the subject of the panel on “Interbellum Internationalisms and India: Towards a Social History”. Maria Framke (Jacobs University, Bremen) presented a fascinating paper entitled “Fascist Italy and National Socialist Germany: Ideal Templates for India’s Economic Development?” on the influence of European Fascism and National Socialism on Indian intellectuals like Benoy Kumar Sarkar and particularly on the national planning committee within the independence movement. In her paper on “‘Oppressed Peoples of the World’ and India, 1927–1930”, Michele L. Louro (Temple University, Philadelphia) studied the relationship between Jawaharlal Nehru and the League against Imperialism in the late 1920s. In the panel on “Radical Politics in 20th Century Punjab” Benjamin Zachariah (University of Sheffield/Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin) examined another international dimension of Indian revolutionary politics in a brilliant presentation “A Long, Strange Trip: The Travels of Har Dayal” (although, as Zachariah

pointed out, Dayal of course hailed from Delhi and became “Punjabi” only due to the British-Indian police).

Another overarching issue treated in many papers was religion. The mostly historical studies of religious reform movements and of Sufism, for example, were represented in panels of their own. Current phenomena were also observed: In the panel on “Rethinking the Role of Religion in Processes of Development and Social Change in India”, Gurharpal Singh (University of Birmingham) presented a study on “Religious Transnationalism and New Development Initiatives in South Asia: A Case Study of Ravidassias in the West Midlands, United Kingdom”. Singh demonstrated how members of a particular religious group residing in Great Britain can have an enormous economic influence in India through transnational connections and are even able to create “islands of development” in Punjab. In another panel, Nadja-Christina Schneider (Humboldt University, Berlin) gave a presentation on “Islamic Feminism and the Emergence of New Subjectivities among Muslim Women in India”. Far from being a mere duplication of the three historical waves of expression (individual writings, everyday activism, and organized movement activism), Schneider observes a “dynamic simultaneity”, which also encompasses new forms of expression such as graphic novels or films, new media, and new “communicative spaces” like websites.

One of the most pressing issues with regard to South Asia is the question of security policy and regional stability, dealt with in the panel on “South Asia’s Changing Security Environment and the Role of Identity”. One of the conveners of the panel, Ummu Salma Bava (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi), opened the discussion with her presentation on “Indian Foreign Policy: Constructing a New Identity”. According to Bava, the end of the Cold War was a crucial turning point. After 1990, India was able to forge a “new identity” in foreign policy while overcoming restrictions stemming from the Cold War environment. This was also helped by a change in (self-)perception. The “new-found confidence” fostered by a sustained economic growth has encouraged India to challenge existing structures of power in international relations and call for a “new multilateralism”. Indian foreign policy, however, remains torn between India’s aspiration to become one of the top global powers and its commitment to its leadership role in the developing world. Mohammed Badrul Alam (Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi) shed some light on the relations between India and Japan. His presentation “Between Hard Power and Soft Power: An Analytical Study of India-Japan Relations” showed the framework of the bilateral relationship and assessed current developments. Relating to one aspect of Alam’s study, Christian Wagner (German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin) spoke on “India’s Soft Power: Prospects and

Limitations". Drawing on Joseph S. Nye Jr., Wagner defined soft power as "the ability to shape the preferences of others", i.e. "getting others to want the outcomes that you want". In his fascinating presentation he laid out India's soft power resources (culture, political values, and foreign policy) and related them to capacities and specific capabilities in India's foreign policy. In the field of culture, for instance, India's main soft power capacity lies in its pluralism, which is translated into the foreign policy capabilities ICCR (Indian Council for Cultural Relations), IBEF (India Brand Equity Foundation), and Bollywood. According to Wagner, India generally prefers a "defensive" posture on soft power and focuses on image building rather than on exercising influence. The challenge will be to transform its capacities into capabilities.

India's foreign policy was further examined in Sandra Destradi's (German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg) paper: "Why Small Countries Matter: India's Relations with Bangladesh". Destradi gave a detailed account of the development of bilateral relations since 2001 and distinguished three main phases, all of which have been marked by a change of government in Bangladesh. As an overall trend she saw a more positive relationship since 2008. However, many controversial issues such as transnational migration have not been tackled, and a fallback to the former "blame game" between the two countries remains possible should there be a change of government in Bangladesh. Yang Lu (University of Heidelberg) assessed the arguably even more important relations of India with China. Her paper on "Sino-Indian Relations and their Implications for South Asian Security" focused on the national interests of both actors within a constructivist theoretical framework. Chris Ogden (University of Edinburgh) drew a much broader picture. His presentation "Examining Ideational Sources of Security in South Asia" distinguished three general levels of analysis and foreign policy identity: Individual policy-makers can shape the foreign policy of a country remarkably, as was the case with Jawaharlal Nehru. National groupings such as the Pakistani army can exercise a disproportionately strong influence if they have a dominant and unchallenged status within a given society. Finally, the specific traits of regions like South Asia narrow foreign policy choices even if they are mere "accidents of geography".

Although India constituted the focus of many papers, other countries in the South Asian region were dealt with as well. A case in point is the panel on "Taliban, Durand Line and Refugees: The Afghan-Pakistan Border Region under Stress" convened by Conrad Schetter (University of Bonn). Schetter himself gave the first presentation, entitled "Contested Border: Pashtunistan – Tribalistan – Talibanistan". The Pashtunistan dispute is arguably the most important issue between Kabul and Islamabad. It is related to the old con-

flict between the state and the tribes of the border region (“Tribalistan”). Additionally, the “radicalization of society in the name of Islam” poses another challenge in the amalgamation of tribal norms and Islamic codes (“Talibanistan”). Theodore P. Wright (State University of New York, Albany) talked about the American involvement in Afghanistan. His paper on “Changing and Contested American Perceptions of the Role of the Taliban in the War in Afghanistan: Reevaluation or Continuity from Bush to Obama?” assessed U.S. foreign policy towards Afghanistan during the last decades, describing current developments within the national security framework which point towards continuity rather than change. Only “slight adjustments” have been made, and diplomacy involving the Taliban is not considered at all. While there are substantial “forces of continuity” in foreign policy decision-making in the United States, Wright concluded that the case for a continued U.S. involvement in Afghanistan is “weak among American voters”. There is “not much patience for a heavier involvement in developmental programs” for Afghanistan. Whether the forces for continuity in U.S.-Afghan relations can overcome this “neo-isolationist impulse” remains to be seen.

Another notorious conflict region in South Asia is Sri Lanka. Although the civil war ended in 2009, discrimination and hardship endure for the Tamil population, as Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam (Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich) and Sumati Rajesh (University of Madras, Chennai) pointed out. In their passionate presentation entitled “Impact of the Sri Lankan Conundrum on Politics in Tamilnadu”, both emphasized that the Tamil people in Sri Lanka are “not provided the right to self-determination” and that ethnic discrimination is widespread. According to Hellmann-Rajanayagam, security checks and travel restrictions are still in full force, and governmental pressure on researchers creates the impression that the war is not over at all. Rajesh illustrated the connections to Tamil Nadu and the role of local politics in this Indian state in the conflict in Sri Lanka.

The panel on “Megacities in South Asia as Arenas of Risks and Resilience” broadened its scope beyond the Indian cities of Delhi and Hyderabad. Particularly Dhaka was dealt with extensively. Wolfgang-Peter Zingel (University of Heidelberg) spoke on “Food Policy for the Megacity Dhaka”. Generally, the average food supply in Bangladesh is better today than at any other time for which statistics are available. If evenly distributed, there is enough food to eradicate hunger. However, there is no common food policy for the megacity Dhaka. Instead of one overarching concept a score of implicit policies tackle the question of food production and food supply. Although many problems remain, Dhaka and the city’s poor benefited in many ways indirectly from those policies and from modes of “informal”

governance. According to Zingel, the most important task for the Bangladeshi government is to create a sustainable balance between the sometimes no longer clearly distinguishable groups of urban food consumers and rural food producers. Salma A. Shafi (Centre for Urban Studies, Dhaka) presented a paper on the issue of "Organizing the Urban Poor in Dhaka". She came to the conclusion that "the severe crisis that Dhaka faces" has been caused by a "lack of planning for its physical and social infrastructure and by not responding to the needs of the urban poor." According to Shafi, non-governmental initiatives and programs such as "URBIS: The Urban Capacity and Learning Laboratory" may provide "a solution by creating an enabling condition for the poor to help in their sustainability and positive development."

The last day of the conference witnessed a forum on "The Future of Identity Politics in India and Pakistan" which sparked a fascinating and lively discussion. Sudir Chandra, who also presented the keynote address earlier, emphasized that the real question is not whether identity politics is good or bad. As "an informed citizen" he observes "a lot of goodwill" among the population of India and Pakistan, but its politicians tend to stir up emotions to create "a taste of bitterness" between the two countries. Civil society can play an important role in better relations but transparency and honesty in the political arena remain crucial to any improvement. Binakshmi Nepam (Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network / Control Arms Foundation of India) gave some insight into Pakistani involvement in insurgency movements in Northeast India. According to her, the "cross-country insurgency-sponsoring" remains a serious problem. Muhammad Tousif Akhtar (University of Balochistan) took a pessimistic view. The problems between India and Pakistan are "increasing day by day". Like Prof. Chandra, he saw very good relations on the civil society level while the relationship in the realm of politics remains problematic. India, Prof. Akhtar stated, should play "the role of a big brother rather than the role of a big rival." Finally, Günther Koenig, former German Consul-General in Madras (Chennai) and chairman of the Indo-German Society Bonn/Cologne, gave his assessment of the current situation. The recent Indo-Pakistani talks reminded him of a "dialogue between deaf and dumb", the only outcome being the "agreement to disagree." According to Koenig, there is a sense of resignation and disappointment in view of the arrogance of the two governments. However, Koenig went on, it is not necessarily the governments but the people that bring about change. He pointed to the fall of the Berlin Wall as an example of how a tense and seemingly irresolvable situation might change abruptly. In any case, India as the bigger of the two countries involved "should show more generosity."

The main speaker at the final assembly was Prof. Dietmar Rothermund, longtime president of the EASAS. In his brilliant lecture he paid tribute to the three Schlegel brothers who all had some connection to India and impact on the development of India studies and indology in Germany. While Karl August Schlegel (1761–1789) died at the young age of 28 years in Madras and never had the opportunity to publish his studies on the military geography of South India, his brother Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) became known as the “father of German indology.” Friedrich Schlegel’s famous book on the language and wisdom of India (*Über die Sprache und Weisheit der Indier*, 1808) remains one of the classic texts in the study of that country. The third brother, August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845), translated the Bhagavad Gita into Latin and, from 1818 onwards, taught Sanskrit in Bonn, the site of this year’s ECMSAS. Both Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel played an important role in laying the foundation for German indology. Rothermund went on to describe the development of the ECMSAS since “conference zero” in Bad Herrenalb in 1966, placing special emphasis on the process of disciplinary expansion. In assessing the 2010 conference, he noted the large number of panels devoted to religion, which seems to indicate that religion is back as an important subject in South Asian studies. After his lecture, Prof. Rothermund was honored for his longstanding and ongoing contribution to the ECMSAS and to the EASAS, both of which owe their existence in large part to his commitment and dedication.

Overall, the 21st European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies proved to be a stimulating intellectual experience in a wonderful environment. The organization team, headed by Heinz Werner Wessler from the Institute of Oriental and Asian Studies/University of Bonn, did an outstanding job in organizing the conference itself and also several other activities for participants, ranging from a Bollywood party to a boat trip on the river Rhine. The standard for the next conference in 2012 has indeed been set high.

Pierre Gottschlich

Appendix

Panels convened at the 21st European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies

1. Rethinking Bhakti in North India
2. The History of Drugs and Alcohol in Modern South Asia (18th–20th Centuries)
3. Radical Politics in 20th Century Punjab
4. Public Death and the State in South Asia
5. Inequality and Affirmative Action in South Asia

6. Uttar Pradesh: Development Failure and Identity Politics
7. Rethinking the Role of Religion in Processes of Development and Social Change in South Asia
8. Representing Dalitism in Contemporary India: Beyond the Discourse of Victimhood
9. Globalization and Migration Incentives and Inhibitions vis-à-vis South Asia
10. South Asia's Changing Security Environment and the Role of Identity
11. Interbellum Internationalisms and India: Towards a Social History
12. Ritual and Healing in South Asia
13. Religion, Literature and Film in South Asia and the South Asian Diaspora
14. Speaking of the Self? Women and Self-Representation in South Asia
15. Modern Languages in South Asia: Their Place in the Culture
16. Dissent, Opposition and Minority in Contemporary Literature and Film from South Asia and/or the South Asian Diaspora
17. Violence, Public Authority and the Bargaining State in South Asia
18. Intersecting Contexts: Media Cultures, Politics and Identity in South Asia
19. Indigenisation of Modernity in Indian Tribal Societies
20. Contours of Local Governance in South Asia: Legitimacy and Empowerment
21. Regional Cooperation in South Asia: The Impact of Policy and Perception and the India-Pakistan Relationship
22. Gender and Armed Conflict in South Asia
23. Bengal Studies Panel
24. Contemporary and Historical Aspects of Labour Regulations and Labour Standards
25. Regulating the Informal Sector in South Asia: Normativity and Representation in Social, Legal and Policy Processes
26. Educating Ideals: Values and Morals Nurtured in Religious and Secular Educational Regimes in South Asia
27. Contextualizing 'Political Society': Some Critical Empirical Perspectives
28. Subalternity Reconsidered: Political and Epistemological Challenges
29. Histories of Science and Technology in Twentieth Century South Asia
30. The Public Representation of South Asian Religions in the Postcolonial World
31. The Emerging Middle Class in India: Shifting Locations, Values, Identities
32. Rethinking Economic Zones in South Asia
33. New Approaches to the Study of Sufism in South Asia
34. Communism Compared: Andhra Pradesh and Kerala in the 1950s

35. The City and the Public: Social Dimensions of Intra-Urban Networks in Colonial South Asia
36. Taliban, Durand Line and Refugees: The Afghan-Pakistan Border Region under Stress
37. Confrontations in Sri Lankan Politics: Origins and Present Developments
38. Human Health in Urban and Peri-Urban South Asia
39. Megacities in South Asia as Arenas of Risks and Resilience
40. Reproductive Tourism in India: Ethical and Legal Concerns
41. Religious Reform Movements in South Asia from the Nineteenth Century to the Present
42. Indian Satire in the Period of First Modernity
43. Christians, Cultural Interactions, and South Asia's Religious Traditions
44. Kerala's Development in Context: Emerging Realities, Historical Vistas, Comparative Scope