



Preface

Our Worth and Value

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It gives me great pleasure to present our readers with the new Nidān December 2023 issue. I thank the guest editor of this special issue, Dr. Venugopal Maddipati, for organizing this second volume and bringing together a fine group of erudite scholars on the history and anthropology of relational space. I thank all our contributors for their high-quality articles that reconceptualise the way space is historically produced and reproduced through political, historical, and literary action. Before leaping into a description of contributions, however, I would also like to thank our peer reviewers for their encouragement, inspiration, advice, and patience, for putting in so many dedicated hours of engagement with our contributions. It is with their support that this second volume has been possible. While all our contributions are brilliant, I would like to particularly mention here, how our editor, contributors, and reviewers from Ambedkar University Delhi faced institutional challenges this year, with the summer months of 2023 marked by faculty strikes. Despite pressures, they sincerely continued to work and cooperate with Nidān and its editorial team. I thank them for this.

Commencing this second volume, Bhawna Parmar provides us an in-depth anthropological perspective, when writing movingly on how Adivasi identity is produced through the space of government school classrooms in Jharkhand. Devanand Kamat, writing on the history of vernacular literature and literary movements, explores how the early- to mid-20th century Maithili language magazine, the *Mithila Mihir*, imagined and produced a separate political identity for *Maithil* upper-castes, the region of Mithila, and the Maithili language, aided especially by the patronage of the Darbhanga Raj. Isha Chouksey presents a historical analysis of Nagpur's urban development in late colonial times. Her paper investigates how colonial politics became subverted by commercial and industrial enterprises that transformed Nagpur by reordering its spaces for neo-industrial elites. One of the most outstanding facets of her contribution is her artwork.

Continuing with the rich tapestry of historical analysis, Pritpal Randhawa and Rachna Mehra provide us with an intellectual analysis of Ghaziabad and its history. A burgeoning satellite town on the eastern boundary of New Delhi, Randhawa and Mehra show how Ghaziabad's urban development is framed by a complex dependent-cum-competitive mode, pressurised by the national capital. Our fifth research article explores disaster ballads from Kerala. Written by exceptionally gifted scholars Ophira Gamliel and Shihab Kalluvalappil, this article, that technically falls outside the purview of the special issue, somehow also miraculously speaks to its theme. While this is a coincidence, it is certainly a serendipitous one, with Gamliel and Kalluvalappil providing readers with the added intellectual dimension of poetry that poignantly reflects and responds to the ecological crisis increasingly experienced by coastal Indian spaces. What a timely piece!

And the research articles are not all; this December 2023 issue has a rich array of book reviews as well, with Epsita Halder writing on Afsar Mohammad's selection of translated Sufi poetry, Tim Allender's review on Felicity Jensz's book on missionary education in 19th and 20th century India, and Sadan Jha's review of Dilip Menon, Nishat Zaidi, Simi Malhotra and Saarah Jappie's book on oceanic travel as historical method. This is followed by my review of Kedar

Kulkarni's book on Marathi literature in the 18th and 19th century, Kaustubh Naik's review of Shailaja Paik's book on Tamasha, and Jackson Stephenson's review of Andrew Ollett's book on the relation between Prakrit and Sanskrit in precolonial India. Westin Harris's review of Vijay Sarde's book on the Natha Sampradaya in Maharashtra is close to my heart, as Sarde's book is of special interest to me. Not only does it discuss my home region like Shailja Paik and Kedar Kulkarni's book—Maharashtra, Sarde's book is also a product of a thesis submitted at my own alma mater: the Deccan College Post-graduate Research Institute in Pune. Harris provides us with a neat encapsulation of the book's argument that is a pleasure to read. Lastly, Torsten Tschacher presents us with a review-cum-analysis of Margherita Trento's brilliant book on Beschi and his Tamil contributions to Catholic devotional literature in South India. Tschacher's review can be read as a sequel to Jason Fernandes's review of Francis Clooney's book on Saint Joseph in South India that was published earlier this year in *Nidān's* July 2023 issue.¹

As I come to the end of describing what this volume holds, let me dwell briefly on a subject that has preoccupied me in the last year. To ask the rhetorical question: What is the worth and value of an open-access journal like *Nidān* in an increasingly corporate-incentivised academic world? *Nidān* functions according to a traditional publishing model, perhaps an old-fashioned one, hinging on personal cooperation and not anonymous and digitally complex and perhaps-intimidating submission portals. We put our papers through an in-depth peer-review process that sometimes takes a couple of months, without making demands on our scholar peer-reviewers to turn in their digitised verdicts in 2 weeks. We edit our texts manually and free of cost, without using artificial intelligence. I have received overwhelming feedback in the recent months on how *Nidān* cannot succeed without a SCOPUS rating, and how this rating is imperative. It is not that I am not half-convinced of this argument myself, especially since having such a rating is insisted upon by universities that employ many of my guest editors and contributors. But, universities also accept peer-reviewed journal articles, especially if these journals are of a high academic standard.

The insistence on SCOPUS, I suspect, has become somewhat symbolic over here, even if coming mostly from scholars who otherwise decry the increased corporatisation of the academy, especially in the humanities. To remain on the safer side of their universities, they nevertheless continue to insist on a corporate rating-scale as a benchmark for unblemished excellence. And this is hardly true! For instance, I often read, every other day, of how one or the other SCOPUS rated journal is actually bogus. A SCOPUS rating, though perhaps an important parameter of value for many a humanities journals, is surely not the sole parameter of a journal's worth?

I have observed—and I frankly submit my observations here—the insistence on SCOPUS rating, though perhaps important, is also a vicious cycle. For example, those who insist that *Nidān* be SCOPUS rated, display little self-reflexivity about the context within which such an insistence on SCOPUS rating operates—the abject resource crunch of the academy—especially in the humanities. This resource limitation centrally includes the inaccessibility of research content, scholarly reading materials—recent books and journals in the region that *Nidān* focuses on—India, and South Asia in general.

Without adequate research resources, how can journal articles that are up-to-date and good enough to be published in a SCOPUS rated journal, ever be written? The rejection rate and corporate elitism of SCOPUS rated journals is after all, also high. And this is because, despite brilliant and original ideas, there aren't enough affordable resources that can be consumed by readers and students whose first or even second languages are not English, and whose

¹ See (<https://hasp.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/nidan/article/view/22231/21624>), 08.01.2024.

resource-poor contexts do not afford them with corporate-rated and marketed research materials that are published and funded in the first world. There is a gap between corporate-rated 'good' resources and the production of new research at the grassroots in South Asia, that can enable the writing and publishing of good quality and methodologically rich monographs and journal articles. As encyclopaedias, companion guides and handbooks grow increasingly unaffordable, they give rise to an alternate economy of grey-market scans, where the ability to scan, to own a scanner, or to have enough electricity costs to run a scanner, itself becomes a symbolic replacement of free and good quality public education—somewhat like SCOPUS rating itself. Scanning does not, in itself, produce or ensure free public education, and neither does SCOPUS rating.

There is significant dearth in the availability of theoretical and methodological resources that can be discursively read and understood—resources that pertain to the self's context, but are produced and funded elsewhere in the first world. The resource inaccessibility that corporate-rating produces only grows more crushing as an increasing number of international libraries and serious journalism remains hidden behind paywalls. An increasing number of tier-one journals charge authors astronomical processing / open-access fees to get published and be read, and the same houses charge readers with equally hefty downloading fees. What is the validity of demanding a SCOPUS rating, when one's research exists within this corporate environment, wherein research inaccessibility is so high that writing good quality journal articles becomes almost impossible? Isn't the ability to learn through the tried-and-tested method of reading and discussion (even at the cost of making the occasional mistake), the whole point of public education—free teaching / research / publishing? Or is making a corporate-rated 'product' the new and only aim of research?

I often receive feedback to the effect of how Nidān may not be respected unless it makes or charges money—due to a tendency among consumers, to not respect what comes easily, or free of cost. While there is some common sense and native wisdom to be had from such observations, it is also important to discern the difference between a business model and a public education model, however old-fashioned the latter sounds. Apart from scans, the corporatisation of the academy has led to a market flooding of alternative narratives: uncomplicated and fictionalised historical narratives that allegedly democratise education because they are easier to read. But this is also, unfortunately untrue. These glossy simplistic books geared sometimes to engender patriotic pride among readers, cost as much as academic books, if not more.

The only way to democratise education, is through public education—something I have personally gained from, both in India and in Germany. Maybe, it is unfashionable to say so, but I see Nidān's goals as fostering this spirit—passing on the gift of public education that I received, to the next generation of readers, editors, reviewers, researchers, and writers, in a bid to jointly create and increase resource accessibility in the humanities. Nidān is not externally funded. Neither I, nor my editors, peer-reviewers, proof-readers, or contributors are paid. We create and strive to produce content that can be easily read and understood without compromising on academic quality, simply because it is important to do so in the spirit of public education itself—the gift our teachers and mentors passed to us. At the expense of being called outdated and old-fashioned, I still experience slight shock when good scholars, beneficiaries of public education themselves, refuse to pass on this gift without remuneration.

Maybe they are right in a way; maybe governments should allocate more funds to public education especially in the humanities—a burden that is often projected on other, equally underfunded research initiatives like Nidān. Maybe governments as well as profit-oriented corporate giants in the publishing world should respect humanities scholars. But that is

perhaps also another debate, concerned with the politics of top-down funding / underfunding in the education sector more generally. The absence of support from above cannot be used as subterfuge to justify our refusal to take personal responsibility for a public education system that not only made us, but also formed our very language of doing meaningful politics and academics. Doing research in the humanities is a conscious political choice (as my mentor at Nidān once said), and the worth and value of how I see my work with Nidān is also to continue in this same spirit.

I have been provided a small humble opportunity to take this personal responsibility, to uphold a public education system that made my own research ideas feasible. It must be up to me (and us)—with the smallest opportunities available to us, as lucky beneficiaries of a public education system, to imbibe its spirit, and support free providers. Without this spirit and responsibility, the compassionate advocacy of Bhawna Parmar’s article in this issue that describes the travesty of classroom education for Adivasi students may well be wasted, or relegated to being understood as academic regurgitation. But this is not true! For example, the Adivasi boy she describes in her article, Rueben, is a real person even if anonymised in the article. Unless we resist corporatisation, there will be no way of stopping a potentially destructive trend from unfolding that will continue to devalue research and researchers by ‘creating’ us as either market successes or market failures.

This hurts poorer students and researchers the most. We can hardly blame them for reading non-complex, simplistic materials that circulate on social media networks free of cost, if we cannot provide them with more-responsible reading materials that they can freely access and understand. Students do not need to respect us personally, though that would indeed be gratifying; they simply need to have enough academic materials to read that is freely available (and understandable) in the public domain—something my generation had access to.

Paradoxically, I still need to convince those who are already convinced of my arguments—scholars of my generation and beneficiaries of the public education system. I still have to battle their fear of making a ‘bad career move’ in investing their time and effort in a journal that reaches student readers and writers with good ideas, but also those who face a resource crunch. This is marked by the fact that Nidān in its present state is neither SCOPUS rated, nor corporate-incentivised. It is a sincere, university-led journal, that in the spirit of public education, produces good content free of cost through collective effort and motivation.

Nidān has had an intense journey as my predecessor Professor P. Pratap Kumar already outlined in the introduction of the last issue.² A product of sincere hard work, and commitment among scholars for over three decades, Nidān was first a department journal, before efforts were made to reach international readership. This year, Nidān has shifted to HASP (Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing) in Germany, and by making this shift, Nidān has again, luckily, entered a traditional public education model that is still alive, though increasingly underfunded in Germany.

I must assure my readers and Nidān audiences that though I will certainly apply for a SCOPUS rating in the near future, the absence of a corporate rating does not devalue Nidān and the quality of the research it publishes. It cannot devalue the labour and efforts that contributors and editors put into the journal to bring excellent research into the public domain, completely free of cost. Failing to acquire the symbolic badge of a SCOPUS rating, does not mean that we have failed as committed, hardworking, and sincere academics.

² See (<https://hasp.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/nidan/article/view/22219/21641>), 08.01.2022.

I end my ruminations here, and taking the opportunity to apologise for the slight delay in the publication of this December 2023 volume, since it is already January 2024 as I write this preface. I wish my readers and contributors a wonderful new year 2024, and I hope you will enjoy the Nidān December 2023 issue—there are some wonderful articles and reviews here!

References

Online Resources

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