



Preface

Intersectionality

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It gives me great pleasure to present our readers with the July 2024 issue of *Nidān: International Journal of Indian Studies* (volume 9). Titled “Race, Caste, and Conversion in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia” this issue is guest edited by Eliza F. Kent, and is, as always, in the open-access mode, published by the University of Heidelberg (HASP – Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing), Germany. This issue has been specially exciting for me. As Kent explains in the introduction (pp. 1-3), the contributors of this issue (me included) came together at a panel on Race, Caste and Conversion in South Asia at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion in Denver in the late autumn of 2022. Sponsored by the South Asian Religions Unit and the Religious Conversion Unit, our presentations resonated strongly among contributors and commentators, inspiring us to make a special issue out of it, led by Kent. The chemistry of the panel thereafter continued, spilling over into wonderfully expressed academic articles that even inspired me to design a separate, special study of my own on Pandita Ramabai’s Mukti Mission. While we indeed miss Megan Robb and Afsar Muhammad who were part of the Denver panel, we gained Sonja Thomas’s engagement, her vibrant voice effortlessly mingling with and strengthening our impassioned arguments. This issue has been a turning point for many of us involved in future writing projects, creating an intellectual bond.

The most important (re)learning for me in this issue surrounds the theory of ‘intersectionality’ from the late 1980s (see Kent [this volume], pp. 50-67). While it seems that there has been much water under the bridge since the 1980s, theoretical terms like intersectionality have nonetheless retained their charge due to a plethora of empirical research that continues to analyse and apply the concept. Intersectionality for me is closer to a theory of power, of power relations and power balances that critically evaluate the limitations inherent in the simplistic mitigation of systemic disempowerment. Paradoxically, we are often forced to ignore the inadequacy of simplistic power restorations schemes that advertently/ inadvertently end up strengthening already dominant groups, simply because of the importance of justice provision as a mediated political process from above. For example, if we were to consider women a ‘section’ of Indian society, few among us would oppose the empowerment of Indian women. In fact, so strong is the need for gender-based justice that we are unable to ask the subsequent intersectionality question that automatically follows from gender-empowerment policies: how many ‘empowered’ women are in fact from urban and already privileged backgrounds? How many belong to already dominant, land-owning castes and/ or traditionally affluent families and communities? Further, in their journey towards becoming the beneficiaries of top-down empowerment policies, how many women are manipulated as political pawns within systemic patriarchy? Finally, how do women negotiate complex intersectional hierarchy?

We can ask many fundamental questions on intersectionality for the South Asian context, exploring asymmetrical power-relations that produce a zero-sum endorsement of the status quo. Some foundational questions for my understanding of intersectionality are: who chooses to exert power? What kind of power? When? To what end? Who benefits, and how? What are the enabling/ disabling, jostling tensions brought to the forefront within the power domain,

defined by complex micro-contexts? In the context of the South Asian diaspora in the West for instance, how does class- and caste-based access to competitive education and professional training play a role in determining social relations within the community claiming origin from the same region/ religious group?

It is well possible to ask limitless questions about intersectionality with the answers addressing asymmetrical power relations between fluid, precarious marginalities. While asymmetrical relations generated through racial, ethnic boundaries have historically, largely been negotiated through conversion—who can ignore Ambedkarite Neo-Buddhism—it is also important to note that converts form independent groups of their own, defined by fluid internal tensions. While converts struggle to establish a new definitional understanding of their ‘difference’; on the other hand, they tap into pre-conversion identities that essentialise them to qualify their difference. For example, when B.R. Ambedkar established Navayana or Neo-Buddhism as an independent branch of Buddhism in India, conversion emancipated Dalits from the caste-oppression of Hinduism. Hence, Navayana, especially in Maharashtra is inextricably linked with a strong Dalit identity (mostly the *mahaar* caste). Seen from a historical perspective, Dalit Neo-Buddhism could be considered an intersectional category, especially since not all *mahaar* persons are Neo-Buddhists, and not all Indian Buddhists follow Navayana or are even Marathi. Almost 90% of Navayana Buddhists live in Maharashtra and number 6.5 million according to the census (2011); they constitute 5.8% of the state’s population and 77% of the entire Buddhist population of India. While there has been important research on lower-caste conversions in the 20th century, we know relatively little about micro-contexts that witnessed negotiation between Neo-Buddhists and the other Buddhists. For example, what would be the relation between Neo-Buddhists and Tibetan Buddhists/ the Dalai Lama in India? Are there any micro-historical contexts of negotiation between them?

Though intensely enjoyable, exploring intersectionality in this *Nidān* issue across various historical contexts has demanded tremendous energy, discipline, and coordination from editors, commentators, and contributors. Therefore, in addition to our contributors Arun Jones, Sonja Thomas, and Torsten Tschacher, I want to thank Eliza Kent for bringing us all together and shepherding us through the issue. I also want to thank Brian Hatcher who read all our papers carefully before writing an excellent concluding note that brought us all back to our previous discussions at the AAR Denver panel. I also want to thank our external scholar commentators and reviewers who have provided us with sound intellectual inputs, encouraging us to hone our arguments. Therefore, a big thank you to Razak Khan, R. Santhosh, Sanal Mohan, Timothy Dobe, and Chandra Mallampalli.

Not to be ignored, *Nidān* brings its readers the usual interesting collection of book reviews. We start our book review section this time with a special essay by Manjeet Baruah who reviews recent studies on Northeastern ‘orality’. Outlining an intellectual context that valorises orality as representing Northeastern Adivasi society, Baruah in his *Orality, Identity, and the Sense of the Past in the India-Burma Borderlands* analyses the limitations of this approach. He points instead to the importance of ‘discontinuity’ that may help us to understand how communities recreate their own pasts, linked with their contemporary identity. Anandita Bajpai provides us with a brilliant review of Isabel Huacuja Alonso’s *Radio for the Millions* that outlines how the arrival of the radio in the 1930s built sonic bridges between territorial and national divides within contemporary South Asia. I provide readers with a review of Anjali Arondekar’s thought-provoking *Abundance: Sexuality’s History* that exhorts us to look at the archival plenitude we live amidst that we paradoxically refuse to read due to our ingrained biases that reconstitute and co-constitute hegemonic evidentiary regimes. Margherita Trento provides us with a review of Chandra Mallampalli’s sensitive and exhaustive overview of Christian life and history in India, *South Asia’s Christians* that outlines the complex history of a diverse community that is often

unfairly 'Othered'. Ehud Halperin provides us with a review of Kerry San Chirico's *Between Hindu and Christian* that explores the story of a unique Catholic community of Khrist (Christ) Bhaktas in Varanasi—again, an intersectional group of mostly unbaptised Dalit women devotees, whose religious lives centre around the Matra Dham Ashram (Abode of the Mother), an organisation belonging to the Catholic Indian Missionary Society (IMS). Prashant Kidambi provides us with a review of Pushkar Sohoni's *Taming the Oriental Bazaar* that explores the interstitial nature of colonial architectural legacy that results in the formation of categories like *bazaar* halls simultaneously modelled on pre-existing native *bazaars*. Seema Chauhan reviews Brian Black's startlingly beautiful *In Dialogue with the Mahābhārata* that explores the alternative nature of philosophy emerging from the epics through the genre of dialogue and conversation. These alternative values in conversation are self-reflexive, serving to invert conservative and patriarchal notions to make available new spaces for gendered subjects, experiences, and emotions. Finally, to round up the review section, Simon Daisley provides us with a wonderful review of Razak Khan's *Minority Pasts* that explores the formation of Rampur, a capital town and princely state associated with the Rohillas in North India, which, after independence in 1947 was subsumed under the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). Though unplanned and not specially elicited to meet this goal, many of our reviews also highlight the importance of intersectionality. I sincerely hope that our readers will enjoy the issue.

References

Online Resources

The Registrar General & Census Commissioner, (2015). "Population by Religious Community." *Census of India, 2011*. New Delhi Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India (<https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/>), accessed 05.07.2024.