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Editorial: Social movements and the subaltern in postcolonial South Asia

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Social movements have various styles and aims in contemporary South Asia. They are ever-present at the grassroots, contesting power and pressing for change, but they occasionally take centre stage. In India, for example, the anti-corruption movement, led by the well-known Anna Hazare from the 1990s onwards, gained momentum in 2011 and, more recently, thousands from the grass-roots voluntarily gathered in protest against rape and sexual violence after the terrible assault at the end of 2012. At such points it is clear that social movements continue to contribute to the deepening of democracy in the region, but more often than not they pass unnoticed. This special issue, therefore, aims to cast greater light onto social movement activism, action and outcomes in South Asia.

A social movement is defined as “a transformation-oriented collective action, which derives from people’s discontents with the present conditions or certain prospective situations” (Hasegawa and Machimura 2004: 19).¹ Studies on social movements in South Asia have been developed through the following two different disciplinary approaches: (1) Historical studies (mainly dealing with the movements during the colonial period before 1947), which concentrated on “who was the subject of a movement (elites or the

¹ Three key-terms in the definition (orientation toward transformation, collective action and discontents) indicate the following three theoretical approaches, which have been prevalent in studies on social movements in Europe, America and Japan after the 1960s: (1) Collective action theory, which focuses on people’s motivations for participating in a movement (“why does a movement arise?”); (2) New social movement theory, which stresses cultural aspects of a movement such as identities (“what does a movement mean to people?”); and (3) Resource mobilisation theory, which centres upon the nature of leadership and organisation of a movement (“how does a movement develop?”) (Hasegawa 2007). However, studies on social movements in South Asia have been developed almost independently from the mainstream social movement theories in the developed countries.

subaltern)?"², and (2) Studies by sociologists, political scientists, and anthropologists (mainly dealing with movements after the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947), which analysed the nature or the process of development of particular movements. Most of the latter had tended not to have strong intentions for theoretical contributions until the beginning of 1980s (except for such pioneering works by M. S. A. Rao (1984), T. K. Oommen (1990) and R. Kothari (1984)).³

Due to the occurrence of various "subaltern" social movements in South Asia after the 1980s on the one hand, and as the result of close examination of the applicability of social movement theories derived from studies in Europe and America on the other hand, recent scholars have begun to formulate a theoretical framework for analysing Indian social movements. One such framework is the "dual politics" theory by Ray and Katzenstein (2005: 25). According to the "dual politics" theory, the common and most distinctive characteristic of social movements in India is that they always focused on the twofold objectives of "equality" and "identity" simultaneously.⁴ According to the authors, most of the Indian social movements aimed at (1) the correction of unequal or unfair politico-economic-social relations and (2) the formation or consolidation of collective (rather than individual in many cases) identities for specific castes, religions, classes or regions (Ray and Katzenstein 2005, Oommen 2010a, b).

The issues of "equality" and "identity" have indeed been important to many social movements in South Asia. However, it would be wrong to assume that there were fixed ideas and contents regarding "equality" and "identity" which were placed as the objectives to be achieved in social movements. Rather, social movements often provided opportunities for dialogue and negotiation to reconsider what kind of "equality" and "identity" were to be sought after. This special issue aims to focus especially on the multifarious nature of outcomes, achievements or impacts of social movements. In other words, we would like to transform our question from "To what extent have social movements been able to achieve their aims?" to "What do social movements bring about?"

Many scholars on social movements in South Asia have evaluated movements by assessing how a movement contributed to the betterment or the identity formation of

² See, for instance, Seal (1968), Guha (1983) and Chandra (1989).

³ For reviews of the studies on social movements in India, see Rao (1984), Shah (2004) and Fuchs and Linkenbach (2005).

⁴ See Ray and Linkenbach (2005) and Oommen (2010a, b). The former's claims were based on the arguments by Guha (1989) and Omvedt (1994).

“subaltern” people. They tended to analyse how movements realised specific aims such as the achievement of political rights of subaltern groups, the attainment of political and social recognition, the abolition of discriminative structures, the dissolution of economic exploitation, and especially, the security of minimum subsistence and livelihoods of subaltern peoples. Moreover, they tended to adhere to a methodology that measured how the original aims of social movements were actually fulfilled (or not) in practice. Given that social movements are made up of informal networks and tend not to operate like structured organisations, however, such an approach fails to capture the multiple ways in which movement participants interpret and work towards their goals. It is also important, therefore, to investigate the indirect effects and the new forms of agency arising from and within social movements that may have been unanticipated by their founders and leaders. This special issue aims to explore new ways in which to assess the impact of “subaltern” social movements in South Asia by envisaging them as social and political spaces, or fora, rather than simply political campaigns, and the new opportunities for subaltern and other forms of expression that might consequently arise within them.

In this special issue, we have three papers on social movements in India and one special interview. Dr. Ishizaka focuses on the Chipko movement in Uttarakhand to re-evaluate the movement from a wider perspective. In previous studies, the Chipko movement was evaluated as an example of failure because the outcome achieved was one which the local people did not “truly” desire. Instead, Dr. Ishizaka stresses that, whatever evaluations were made from certain viewpoints, the Chipko movement played an important role in the introduction of a new system of forest management, and also brought about the formation of a new network of social activists.

Dr. Funahashi’s paper deals with Buddhist-Dalits in Uttar Pradesh. He focuses on their religious and ritual practices which are conducted selectively and syncretistically. From analyses of their practices and narratives, he concludes that the concept of ‘continuity’ is of great importance and more worthy of consideration than the viewpoint of ‘discontinuity’ in understanding the situation of Buddhist-Dalits in Uttar Pradesh. Rather than viewing conversion as a clean break from the past he charts the strategies and practices of Dalit-Buddhists who are living as ‘a minority within a minority’ after their conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism.

Dr. Gorringe examines the politics of Dalits in Tamil Nadu. The largest Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu, the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, entered the electoral process in 1999, after which the process of institutionalisation has occurred in the movement as a political party. Dr. Gorringe has pointed out that the movement is now attempting to overcome the difficult task of gaining political success without retreating from their core ideals by growing beyond the Dalit category and making new coalitions across the caste line based on Tamil nationalism.

In a special interview with J. Gowthama Sanna, Propaganda Secretary of Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi, the situation of Dalit politics in contemporary Tamil Nadu is discussed. In this rare opportunity to read the full transcript of an interview we learn about the trials and tribulations of Dalit party politics and the ongoing efforts to realise the citizenship of Dalit people today.

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