

# Editorial Note: Marginalities and aspirations in South Asia

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The Editorial Team of The South Asianist is very pleased to announce the publication of its first issue: *Marginalities and Aspirations*. As this is our very first opportunity to introduce our ideas for the publication as well as to state our position in what is a very rich and diverse field of research and publication, we will include a series of short reflections. We will follow this with a brief introduction of each of the excellent contributions we have included.

The idea for a new journal began as a tea-break conversation among a handful of post-graduates seeking creative ways to overcome an in-built detachment in much of academia – that of ‘being in the world’ in the quest for knowledge, and at the same time ‘leaving the world’ in acquiescence to the academy.<sup>1</sup> In an effort to address this disconnect, our teatime discussions encompassed a wide range of topics, including the benefits of open access publishing, the great capabilities of social networking and blogging, and the development of a pedagogical project – a-la-Paulo Freire<sup>2</sup> – with a focus on higher education institutions in South Asia. Many of our disparate thoughts began to crystallise as we discussed the idea of a journal with Dr. Crispin Bates and Dr. Jeevan Sharma of the Centre for South Asian Studies. Dr. Sharma’s 2012 spring-term course ‘Roots of Poverty and Development in South Asia’ provided the final impetus that concretised our ideas into what we have before us today.

*The South Asianist*, therefore, is intended to be a polished, academic area studies journal as well as a pedagogical tool that aims to disseminate critical research to a much wider audience. Echoing Tim Ingold, we are turning ‘towards the world’ in order to find a more

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Ingold articulated this divide quite well in his Plenary presentation during the Scottish Graduate School Social Science, 19 June, 2012, University of Edinburgh.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-freir.htm>

critical gaze: 'critical because we cannot be satisfied with the things the way they are.'<sup>3</sup>

Coherence, it is our contention, cannot be taken for granted, and any certainties we may have identified would be better restated – perhaps indefinitely – as questions.

### *On Academia*

What is academia for? What is it about human action, habit and opinion that seems to form patterns, where at one end of a huge nation conditions reflect refractively those at the other, while a border line in the sand away, things are different? What is it about generations, communities-at-least-mostly-of-choice and election campaigns that use and re-use symbols (lines, colours, reverberating emotive touchstones) for instance? More practically, how can understanding lead to clearer flows of information and lightness of intervening touch? Our opinions may diverge on what the issues are and how best to deal with them, but turning to this sort of knowledge-gathering is a step already taken in one direction (sometimes with a misleading impression of apoliticality) and so we seem to agree that knowledge - specifically the pen and paper kind - is a path with positive possibilities.

South Asia is one thing to the world and many worlds to itself. How to 'cover' it, as they say? Inquiring minds observe, question and analyse. However the material is gathered, patterns are seen and connections noted. The initial framing of questions, their purpose or direction and the potential linkings or consequences of their being made available on an open access basis - all are implied in a 'good' article. Impact is a hugely delicate issue - both for any slips in data handling and for broad political implications of connections drawn.

### *On open access*

Yet the widest possible dissemination of ideas seemingly depends on a cosmic alignment of pedagogy, technology and political will. With some of the earliest open access initiatives emanating from South Asia itself – Mahatma Gandhi's 1909 publication of *Hind Swaraj* being an important precursor to India's freedom movement – the vision for unrestricted access to important repositories of knowledge is not novel. And with technologies far outpacing the science they are built on, it is hard to know when enthusiasm has turned into hype. However, achievements in Internet-based distance learning; open access publishing

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<sup>3</sup> Ingold, Ibid.

software; and initiatives such as the Massive Online Open Courses of the elite Coursera universities, show some promise that this vision of access for all may be realised. But these are imperfect models as long as they remain out of reach of the more distressed sectors of society. Is it not at the margins that ideas have the greatest potential for good?

*This issue*

Marginalities saturate and aspirations catalyse South Asia. Change is underfoot and one size does not fit all. Issues of scale cause unintuitive (for the outsider) outcomes and processes. The most striking example is the article presented by Egorova and Perwez, where a Dalit Jewish community in Andhra Pradesh present an alternative narrative, preserving dignity in the face of oppression, practicing ritual separation from their neighbours. On the other hand, Solinski confounds assumptions about the connections between migration, poverty and wellbeing in his article on the NREGA programme in India, arguing that this ‘pro-poor’ programme does not acknowledge the aspirations of the poor. Research, policy and action are interlinked, and as the reification of the caste system with the caste-based census in parts of South Asia continues to have controversial effects, so the implementation of NREGA in India is based on a hierarchical and moral system of knowledge that denies the poor their capacity to express horizons in their life choices and goals, itself partly a product of social science. Thirdly, in his consideration of the newest adaptation of *Devdas*, Roy pursues the various art forms underlying the cinematic, viewing the aspirational mass format as a sophisticated emotional medium drawing on mythic and religious iconography to depict a great classic tragedy.

At the centre of our issue - and Roy’s second submission - is a review of *Shanghai* – a film which addresses in almost operatic fashion the extent to which the business-elite and their handpicked politicians are willing to push the boundaries of legality in order to realize large-scale, profitable urban development. Interestingly, an activist professor – who eventually succumbs to a state planned accident (Dr. Ahmedi) – bears a remarkable resemblance to the real-life Dr. Binayak Sen, whom Sharma interviews for this issue.

We find topographies of marginality and aspiration at the core of our two video interviews. In his interview with Quasem, Dr. Shapan Adnan of Oxford University describes the dramatic

socio-demographic transformations occurring in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh as a result of illegal land grabbing, the forced migration of indigenous populations, and the settlement of various refugee groups - all at the hands of the Bangladeshi political elite. Similarly, in an interview with human rights advocate and public health practitioner Dr. Binayak Sen, the discussion centres on the lack of proper healthcare for the poor in Chhattisgarh, and how this problem is exacerbated by the conflict between Maoist insurgents and India's heavy-handed counter-insurgency strategies.

Finally, we hope you will agree that the study of South Asia – its languages, geographies, cultures, politics, economies, religions, histories and environments – can be an intensely rewarding endeavour despite the sober realisation that critical analysis can only hope to fully understand a small part of a universe of complex social relationships. We also hope you will agree that any insights gained through the laborious due-diligence of academic research should be accessible to the widest possible audience. With that in mind, take time to read through the excellent essays, review and videos in this inaugural issue, and forward your comments, critiques and suggestions to the editors.

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