13. What is South Asia(n)? Contested Knowledge and the (Re-) Making of the Regional within the Global (Workshop)

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Regional Group "South Asia"

The concept of the region becomes a productive tool to think with when it is broken. This panel explores how South Asia has been established as a region across time and space. Knowledge production, based on colonial ethnography, has contributed to shaping notions of sub-regions and creating a cultural morphology of South Asia, based on essentialized regional diversities and demarcations. As a result, politicians, community leaders, and common people employ the regional as a vernacular category to negotiate political and cultural boundaries.

Regionality also connects the local to the South Asian diaspora and transcultural global processes. Concurrent with recent reconfigurations of the globalization paradigm, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war, a revival of parochial regionalisms and populist nationalisms can be observed in South Asia.

The panel challenges the idea of South Asia as a region with clear-cut borders by exploring how different actors have defined, fostered, established and enlarged the notion of South Asia – both as a world region/area and as a site of manifold, contested sub-regions. Further, it inquires into the social life of South Asia as a regional category and of South Asian regional categories in motion and circulation. We invite contributions based on empirical, theoretical or historical grounding that reflect on the (re-)making of regions within and beyond the geographical area defined as South Asia.

We seek to explore a set of related questions: What actors produce knowledge about various regions' cartographic, physical, ecological, religious, economic or socio-cultural boundaries and in what ways do they employ notions of regional pasts and futures? How is the relationship between the regional, the trans-local and trans-national articulated in our interlocutors' lives? How does regionally situated ethnographic knowledge continue to matter, and how can we critically reflect on the role that post/colonial anthropology played in producing different forms of regionality?

At the crossroads between South and Southeast Asia: some reflections on the politics of (self-)representation in Northeast India

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As Willem van Schendel (2002) pointed out, the study of the highland regions of South/Southeast Asia poses a peculiar conundrum to scholars within clear-cut Area Study divisions. How to 'fit in' conventional scholarship debates if these regions tend to 'fit out'? Northeast India is a case in point: while politically part of South Asia, its highland communities are culturally more akin to communities across Southeast Asia. In addition, despite its vast cultural, linguistic, religious etc. diversity, over the past couple of decades or so the notion that the whole of Northeast India (i.e. the seven or eight "sisters states") represents a separate cultural region within India has pervaded not only political thinking but also popular imaginations – both in the said 'region' and beyond. How justified is it to talk about the Northeast monolithically and how do local communities reflect on that? How can one discuss aspects of cultural heritage and group identities among the Naga, for example, if they are situated at the regional crossroads not just politically, but also culturally? The paper will explore these and related questions on the politics of (self-) representation in Northeast India and its implications for people's identity constructions – and for scholarship in general.

Sojourners in a Circulating Society: Migrant Labor in/of South Asia

Uday Chandra, Georgetown University, Qatar

"Sojourners," as this term of Biblical origin suggests, reside temporarily in places before moving on to others. The term implies an itinerant life as opposed to a fixed one. In this paper, I conjoin this term to the notion of a "circulating society" (Markovits, Subrahmanyam, and Pouchepedass 2006), that is, one in which circulation and mobility are not exceptions but the norm. According to the last Indian census in 2011, an estimated 450 million people, over a third of the population, were living away from their homes and families. By most accounts, this is an underestimate, and despite the lack of a census in 2021, this count is widely believed to have risen appreciably over the past decade.

Drawing on two case studies from my fieldwork over the past decade in Mumbai, India and Doha, Qatar, I aim to flesh out certain shared socio-cultural and political-economic logics of labor migration within and beyond the borders of contemporary India. Stretched kinship relations generate distinctive obligations, I argue, and remake mobile persons and the rural and urban places they straddle simultaneously. Given deep histories of Indian Ocean circulation, where South Asia begins and ends is a key question for me here.

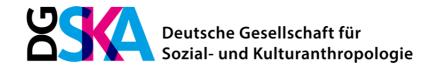**From trans-local to trans-national: Religious and economic practices of Bengali-speaking Muslims in India.**

Debangana Baruah, Georg-August-University Göttingen

Moving beyond space and time, migrant workers in South Asia are often found to be traversing between trans-local and transnational regions. This paper explores how the grass-root regional Muslim party, All India United Democratic Frontier (AIUDF), has become an integral part of forming Bengali-speaking Muslim migrants' social networks in Mumbai and the Gulf countries. While their social networks were constituted by trading relations with the Persian Gulf, these migrants have started their local enterprises. Tracing back to the past, there has been a religious transnational connection and economic transformation between Mumbai and their state of origin, Assam, that resulted in practices of social responsibilities such as charity and donation. While contemporary modalities of religious piety and prosperity have brought about a new form of community development, migrants, on the other hand, understand how regions can bind them spatially through religious connections. Through multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Mumbai and Assam, this paper underscores the significance of how religion and economic status shape migrants' everyday cultural and social life. Lastly, I analyze how their religious practices are linked to economic well-being and religious social upliftment.

Remaking Nepal in everyday encounters

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In this paper, I examine the everyday experience of Wai and Jade, two Chinese who live(d) in Nepal. This ethnographic inquiry into their everyday life in the contact zone between Nepal and China provides a rich and complex account of area-(re)making at different scales. It examines how the transnational and global trajectories of people, ideas and capital, rather than essentialised traits (see Appadurai, 2000), contribute to remaking the concept of area. For a long time, Western colonial ethnography has dominated the knowledge production of Nepal (like other sub-regions in South Asia). To a large extent, the global colonial system and its legacy have interrupted direct regional communication (e.g., between Nepal and China), which could only be resumed in the era of globalisation (Chen, 2010). The everyday life experience of Wai and Jade in Nepal illustrates the new forms of direct communication between these two neighbouring countries that are structured by extremely asymmetrical powers. The paper argues that these new forms of direct communication not only set Nepal in motion but also repeatedly contest, negotiate, enhance and reshape the boundaries of Nepal, opening up

possibilities that could liberate the frozen notion of Nepal from the "colonial matrix of power" (Ndlovuo-Gatscheni, 2013).

"Let there be light in our lives too…"

Gabriele Alex, Tübingen University

The Vagrivel, or Narikuravar as they are called in Tamil Nadu are a community of around 1 lakh individuals. Originating from North India they speak a North Indian dialect at home and Tamil when communicating with Non-Vagri. Having lived a peripatetic lifestyle until they got plots and houses through settlement programs in the 1970s, their myths of origin evoke the regional and transregional through historical accounts of travel and movement.
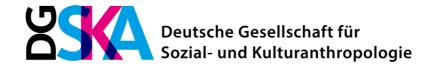
For more than three decades now, they have been campaigning for inclusion in the list of Scheduled Tribes (S.T.) at the state level by staging protests on national and federal level, employing lawyers and urging politicians to take up their cause. In this struggle for S.T. status, the Vagri community leaders have created a political discourse of distinction and uniqueness based on "tribal" characteristics and identity on the basis of language, culture, subsistence and religion, in a way that could be considered strategic essentialism.

This paper looks at these two discourses (myths of origin and political discourse) that stress different threads of belonging and identity. How are concepts of local, regional and national identities evoked and made salient in these different contexts, how are they presented in the media and how do they interact or inform each other?

Being Indian – A necessary essentialism in long-distance activist spaces in Berlin?

Andrea Ries, Freie Universität Berlin

Between 2019 and 2021, I conducted an ethnographic research project in Indian diasporic activist spaces in Berlin that concluded in my Master's thesis. Especially during the peak of the anti-CAA/NRC movement, seeing several hundred people protesting against the politics of the Indian BJP government on the streets of Berlin was a special and new experience for many of my interlocutors. However, negotiating between different backgrounds and community identities of Indians or more broadly South Asians posed difficulties as some examples of individual experiences or parallel mobilisations showed. In my paper, I seek to show how being "Indian" became a crucial vehicle for building spaces of both political mobilisation and collective diasporic belonging. I will describe these processes by

applying and discussing the concepts of transborder citizenship and long-distance nationalism (Glick Schiller and Fouron, 2001). My ethnographic example not only illustrates the usual pitfalls of nationalistic identity constructs such as dynamics of exclusion but leads me to further questions regarding strategic essentialism in protests organised by immigrants in urban spaces of the Global North as raised by Gayatri Spivak (1988). I want to discuss both the danger of silencing of minority perspectives as well as the potential of building international solidarity.

Queer*ing Breath in/across South Asia and Western Europe

Nasima Selim, University of Bayreuth

Uddipto Roy, Independent Scholar

Queer bodies cannot breathe well in the global cis-hetero-patriarchy because structural oppression operates both biosocially and metaphorically. Queer*ing breath is vital for transnational identity politics and the contested knowledge/practice of reconfiguring socio-material conditions of power enacted through bodies, affects, and environments transcending borders. Queer*ing breath moves beyond the universalist understanding of breathing as an involuntary bodily process and challenges not only gender/sexual normativities but also biopolitical marginalization, which denies queer bodies the "universal right to breathe" across geographical locations. In this reflexive and dialogic position piece, we string our attention and attunement to breath/ing as metaphor and bodily process along our situatedness in/across South Asia and Western Europe: Nasima in Berlin, Germany, and Dhaka, Bangladesh, and Uddipta in Kolkata, India. We examine breath/ing in variegated locales of spaces and positions that our interlocutors (in research/activism) and we inhabit, without reducing such multiplicities to mere (regional) comparisons or "methodological nationalism" along the global North-South divide. We focus on our embodied breathing experiences as "scholar-breathers" and writers/activists to offer a queer critique of normative power relations and biosocial "breathing troubles" through which queer lives are rendered unbreathable, here and elsewhere, contesting the notions of fixing South Asia(n) and Western Europe(an) identities.