

## **Geographical South Asian Studies: Current Conceptions**

### **Editorial**

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*Guest Editors*

Since the 1990s, “space”, “place”, “spatiality” and “geographies” have become key categories in social sciences. While disciplines like sociology, economics, social anthropology, history or political science have ignored such categories for a long time, the multiple globalization processes and their implications for societies worldwide after the fall of the Iron Curtain have led to a vigorous debate on spatial notions and their manifold meanings across disciplines. This re-discovery has been apostrophized as the “spatial turn” of social sciences and the humanities.

For geography, this shift in perspective had at least two implications: First, it led to a much more pronounced discussion among geographers on what is actually meant by the notion of space. While geography has always understood itself as chorological science, there was surprisingly little controversy about the meaning of the key term of the discipline until the end of World War II. Whereas the founding fathers of geography understood space mainly as the given physical-material interior of the surface of the Earth, in the post-war era, an understanding emerged that would regard space first and foremost as a social product. Starting from this idea, geographers today are agreed that the concept can only be used in a meaningful way when ap-

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proaching it from the viewpoint of society. Second, while geography had traditionally imported theoretical concepts from social sciences, the spatial turn has changed the game and has set the stage for geographers to export their own theories. Accordingly, in particular the works of Anglo-Saxon geographers like David Harvey (2005), Edward Soja (1996), Derek Gregory (2004), or Doreen Massey (2005) were taken up eagerly by other disciplines, a circumstance that has strengthened the public perception of geographers and led to a boost in their self-esteem (Gebhardt / Reuber 2011).

In German-speaking countries, the works of Benno Werlen (2010) and others led to a reconfiguration of geography as a discipline to study the space-making of people in their everyday interactions, as well as the effects of socially produced spatialities on the agency of individual persons, on social groups and entire societies. Thus, the ground was prepared for an actor-oriented geography which puts emphasis on how people produce space, order and border their worlds, and include and exclude certain groups of people by spatial means. With this shift from regional geography to a “geography of regionalizations”, the research program of geography today is to describe and analyze the manifold geographies that exist in order to explain how they are constructed, and to reflect critically on the risks and underlying power asymmetries that are linked to them.

### **Migration and translocality**

Within geography, migration studies have witnessed an emancipation process in the last decades. Traditionally, the analysis of migration processes was anchored within the sub-discipline of “population geography”, which framed migration as one explanans for understanding the distribution of population in space and time. Since the 1990s, however, migration geography has become a sub-discipline in its own right.

As Russel King (2012) points out in his review on “geography and migration”, geographers have contributed a lot to the interdisciplinary field of migration studies. Examples are Ernst Ravenstein (1889), who developed the first theoretical approach towards understanding migration with his “laws of migration”; Torsten Hägerstrand (1969), who applied his concept of time geography to explaining individual migration processes; Akin Mabogunje (1970), who informed migration theory through system-theory; and Wilbur Zelinsky (1971), who developed the hypothesis of the mobility transition. Yet, what has changed over the last few decades is the type of disciplines, with which geographers exchange their theories. Until the 1990s, the study of migration in population geography imported theories mainly from economics

and demography. Since the 1990s, theoretical imports have come mainly from sociologists such as Hartmut Esser (2006) and a more clear-cut social science-based perspective has been worked out. Felicitas Hillmann's recently released edited volume (2016) is a case in point of this shift. She follows an actor-oriented approach that perceives migrants as both products and as producers of newly emerging translocal social realities, and studies the multiple ways in which migration creates, connects, and transcends places.

In this issue of *International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, two articles reflect geography's current developments in migration studies. Lisa-Michèle Bott, in her paper on internal and international migration in and from Pakistan, frames migration as a strategy of migrants to adapt to climate change. Migration is viewed here as a strategy deliberately chosen by migrants to react to changes threatening their livelihoods and thus to actively shape their own fate and that of their kin. The author shows that migration as a strategy to adapt is hardly recognized by policy makers in Pakistan and generally viewed negatively. She concludes that the framework set by the state must answer the need to capture the full dimension of migration as a strategy to survive and prosper in the face of climate-induced threats. The second paper, by Carsten Butsch, draws attention to the transnational practices of Indian migrants in Germany. From his perspective, it is not migration itself that is of interest but the social spaces migrants create, connecting the places of their origin to places of settlement. Butsch shows how transnational networks are created in different fields of life – private and occupational – and how these networks are used for building transnational social spaces through the everyday practices of the migrants. His findings indicate that these networks change over time and that there are significant differences between first- and second-generation migrants. This case study also shows that transnational practices differ significantly in different contexts: Several phenomena described in studies on transnationalism in other contexts (like the political engagement of transmigrants, e.g. of Haitians in the USA) are not relevant in the case presented by Butsch.

## **Globalization and livelihoods**

Another focus of current geographical studies is on economic globalization and its impact on rural livelihoods. Starting with Alfred Weber (1922 [1909]), economic geography focused traditionally on the explanation of the location of industries, based on the spatial availability of the main components of industrial production: raw materials, capital, and work force. A second issue dealt with markets: where are they located, what population do they serve, and how can an understanding of market location be used for spatial

planning? The work of Walter Christaller (1968 [1933]) on central places clearly provides the most prominent example of this school of thought, as it influenced planning processes in Germany and other countries in the second half of the 20th century. In a global perspective, economic geography also analyzed development processes, mainly by incorporating theories from economics and by applying them e.g. for explaining the growth of regions.

New inspiration came with the introduction of the so-called “relational economic geography” (Bathelt / Glückler 2012), which shifted the former focus of interest from the spatial distribution of production factors to the strategies of economic actors to actively shape the spatial organization of the economy according to their needs. The aim of this newly developing strand has been to understand how entrepreneurs create and maintain their business networks over ever-larger physical distances to ultimately link producers and consumers. In this regard, Gary Gereffi (1994) developed the global commodity chains approach, which shifted the perspective of analysis away from places of production to the transnational organization of production processes. Later, he elaborated the global value chains approach that drew attention to the governance of transnational production and aimed at understanding the process of standard setting and the distribution of negotiating power among the actors involved (Gereffi et al. 2005). A similar approach with a slightly different focus is the global production networks approach, presented by Jeffrey Henderson and colleagues (2002). In contrast to the linear chain approach, it looks at the negotiation power of economic, political and social actors involved and thus includes the role played by national governments and international NGOs into the analysis.

This is the line of thought that the study of Katharina Molitor and Boris Braun in this volume is based on. The two authors analyze the dual role of farmers in Bangladesh as producers and consumers in value chains for food products. They show that farmers search for a balanced position in their networks, located as they are simultaneously on the producer and the consumer side of the chain. In the first case they attempt to increase their household income, and in the second to minimize their expenses. Working from this dual perspective, Molitor and Braun discuss the limited capacity of farmers in Bangladesh to deal with recently increased price volatilities in input and producer markets.

## **Identity and space**

In everyday life, people often imagine the world as a mosaic of cultures that are separated from one another. According to this idea, Germany lies in Europe and thus has a different culture from India. As self-evident as such a

mosaic may seem to be, the existence of “Indian Germans” or “German Indians” indicates that the supposed unity of culture and space has become brittle. In today’s highly globalized world, the idea of the earth’s surface as traversed by clear-cut cultural boundaries can hardly be maintained. This realization has found its way into geographical theorizing: Traditionally, geographers thought of identity in essentialistic terms, that is to say that identity is taken for granted as an ineradicable self, a core of one’s own, which determines who and how one is. However, in his classic *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1978) convincingly showed that identities do not arise out of themselves, but are dependent on images and ideas of others, in the mirror of which they are created and reproduced. Thus, the Orient and Europe no longer simply represent geographical conditions, but are presupposed constructions, which Said has designated “imaginative geographies”.

The interactive production of cultural identity and difference described by Said applies not only to collective social identities such as class, gender, or nation, but also to the production of individual self-identity. This latter process can be elucidated by referring to the concept of positioning (Lossau 2011). Scholars use this term to address people’s everyday practices of pinning down their identities along pre-supposedly objective differences in space. In so doing, we all assign ourselves a place in the world. In this activity, however, it goes unnoticed that it is the very act of positioning ourselves by means of categories such as “we/they” or “here/there”, which creates certain socio-spatial orders, together with the conviction that, logically, these orders exist prior to the process of positioning. Against this background, it is the aim of geographers today to reveal the underlying social mechanisms, the technical means and political strategies employed to create individual and social identities, which only seem to be given facts, but which in reality are social constructs.

Here, two case studies deal with the connection of identity and space: The first one, authored by Katja Mielke, looks at the dialectics of forced immobility and practices of place making among former pastoralists and peripatetics in Afghanistan. Mielke analyzes the self-identity of two traditionally mobile ethnic groups in Afghanistan, who are “stuck” in unauthorized camps in Kabul. She studies the prospects and strategies of these two groups to deal with their situation and she documents how they adjust their livelihoods and seek out alternative identity markers to position themselves in this volatile environment. Mielke shows that the social constitution of the camps as non-places constitutes the major impediment to the two groups’ efforts in striving for belonging. Her study can thus help to understand how place intervenes in the reproduction of individual and collective identities and how place and identity are mutually constituted. The second case study,

by Harald Sterly and Daniel Gerads, investigates the impact of new information and communication technologies on social norms and practices of intimate relationships in Bangladesh. Sterly and Gerads analyze the impact of mobile communication on interpersonal relationships by looking at three empirical examples. They study long-distance relationships of rural-to-urban labor migrants, the practice of “mobile romancing” that youngsters in Bangladesh engage in, often with random partners over the phone, and, finally, how students use mobile phones to circumvent the established separation of males and females in public life in Bangladesh. Mobile communication has enabled these people to create a certain type of “virtual intimacy”, a virtual space characterized by transformed gender relations, which successively translates into society through practices of translocalization and re-regionalization.

### **Future research areas in geographical South Asian Studies**

In view of the discussions among the members of the South Asia Speciality group of the German Geographical Society (AK Südasien der DGfG), we venture to indicate what geographical research topics might emerge or be expanded on in the regions. We assume that in particular the major transformation processes currently taking place in South Asia will attract the interest of geographers.

One main transformation field is related to societies. Within this large subject we see the following topics as specifically relevant for geographical research, with many of them connected to one another: changing agrarian structures, especially technical transformations; the urbanization process, urban transformations (growth, socio-economic polarization, urban heritage, sustainable growth, urban health) and the transformation of peri-urban spaces; societal transformations (changing traditional roles and structures, increasing mobility, the emergence of a “middle class”); increasing integration of South Asian economies into the world economy and especially the region’s role in the expanding South-South trade relations.

The second large transformation field is the environment. Within this subject, we think that the following topics will attract physical geographers especially: developing and improving existing models of water regimes and the impact of climate change for a more differentiated understanding of processes in this very specific environment and their consequences; land use changes and their impact on local and regional environmental systems (urbanization, intensification of agriculture, changing irrigation patterns etc.);

regional impact of climate change; environmental pollution, the diffusion of pollutants and effects on human health.

Of course we cannot predict how studies on geographies of South Asia will look ten years or so from now. As was the case in the last few decades, theories developed elsewhere will be transferred and applied to the study of South Asia. At the same time, South Asian studies will contribute to the development of existing analytic conceptions, approaches, and models to be transferred to other regions around the world. We are hopeful that this fruitful exchange of scientific ideas and empirical findings will be continued and further encouraged in future.

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