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Editorial

Geographies of South Asia: Empirical Research and the Pandemic

Carsten Butsch, Alexander Follmann, Markus Keck, Judith Müller

Introduction

Empirical research is essential for Geography as a discipline. However, due to the current pandemic, collecting data and conducting fieldwork abroad has become an impossibility. Under current circumstances projects can only be carried out with reduced scope or have been completely put on hold, while researchers and PhD candidates are struggling with a very difficult situation – not only data-wise. Against this backdrop, we would like to use the scope of this editorial to reflect upon the meaning of the current COVID-19 pandemic both for geographical research in South Asia and for Geography as discipline. First, we will provide an overview of empirical studies that members of the South Asia Study Group have recently conducted and published. Afterward, we will briefly illustrate how the pandemic has unfolded in South Asian countries and affected their societies. Finally, we will discuss how geographers are dealing with the current situation and what we can learn from it for the future of Geography as a discipline with regional competences.

Geographical research in South Asia

Research in Human Geography is largely fieldwork-based using quantitative and qualitative social science methods while, in recent years, ethnographic methods have increasingly been applied too. Physical geographers use different kinds of natural science methods including, among others, the collection and chemical analysis of soil and water samples, vegetation analysis, or repeat photography. Methods used by both subdisciplines include mapping techniques as well as remote sensing and other geospatial forms of data collection (e.g. satellite images) that are fed into and analyzed by means of Geographical Information Systems. In all cases, direct contact with the ground and access to the “field” is essential.

Geographical research in South Asia funded and conducted by German research institutions has focused on a broad range of topics. Members of the Priority Program 1233 “Megacities–Megachallenge – Informal Dynamics of Global

Change,” funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) from 2006 to 2014, focused on local dynamics of global change, complex processes of urbanization, and questions of urban governance in the megacities of Dhaka (Bangladesh), Shenzhen, and Guangzhou (both China) (Kraas et al. 2019). Aside from this large-scale interdisciplinary endeavor, coordinated by Frauke Kraas as speaker of the program committee, a number of further research projects have been conducted too. Taking the last six years into account, the topics have ranged from urban change and governance (Butsch et al. 2017; Herter 2017), urban waste (Schlitz 2019), urban consumption (Keck 2015; Erler and Dittrich 2020), urban environmental change (Follmann 2016), governance of public space (Grenzebach 2019), urban food markets (Keck 2016), urban heritage (Trumpp 2019), peri-urban dynamics and rural-urban interactions (Butsch and Heinkel 2020; Follmann et al. 2018; Jain et al. 2019), land-use change (Wilken et al. 2017), agricultural transformations and rural livelihoods (Molitor et al. 2017; Najork et al. 2021), globalization and cross-border trade (Wallrapp et al. 2019), translocality/nationality and migration (Butsch 2019; Sterly and Gerads 2018), climate change and migration (Bernzen et al. 2019), labor migration (Uprety 2016), links between water, agriculture, and livelihoods (Nüsser et al. 2019; Spies 2020), mountain urbanisation and water (Dame et al. 2020; Müller 2020), political geographies (Khan Banerjee and Schmid 2015; Wenner 2020), health geography (Hartmann 2017), to soil hydraulic properties (Rehm 2018).

The study group’s annual meetings give space to present and discuss ideas and research proposals as well as work-in-progress presentations from outstanding junior scientists to postdocs and professors. A selection of these have been published in special issues coordinated by working group members (*ASIEN* 134; *International Quarterly for ASIA Studies* 47: 3–4), including this issue, and extended abstracts in the electronic publication series *Geographien Südasiens*.¹ While research on India dominated in the last few years (the subject of 35 of the 55 extend abstracts published between 2015 and 2020), also a number of studies on Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka were presented, while work on Afghanistan and Bhutan remained outside the scope of inquiry. Showing multiple links to neighboring disciplines, recent research by members of the study group has conceptually drawn upon and contributed to, among other fields, Migration Studies, Development Studies, Food Studies, Science and Technology Studies, (Urban) Political Ecology, Governance/Governmentality, and Assemblage and Practice Theory.

All of the works presented above relied extensively on empirical fieldwork. Research by members of the working group published in *Geographien Südasiens* since 2016 used qualitative interviews in almost four-fifths (78 percent) of the studies, almost half (45 percent) drew on other qualitative methods (including focus-group discussions, participatory observations, and ethnographic fieldwork),

1 <https://crossasia-books.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/xasia/catalog/series/gsa>.

while additionally about one-quarter (27 percent) combined qualitative methods with quantitative surveys in the course of harnessing mixed-methods approaches. Other typical geographic methods, including mapping and remote sensing, have to date remained underrepresented.

We are delighted to present in this issue four geographical studies all based on empirical research too. Alva Bonaker's contribution sheds light on the employment practices and labor regimes in the food-production processes related to the Indian "Mid-Day Meal Scheme" in schools. She shows that while targeted to create decent employment opportunities especially for people from disadvantaged backgrounds, in these processes existing inequalities and gender roles are largely reproduced. Christine Hobelsberger takes us to Bangladesh's emerging supermarkets. Looking at it from the retailer perspective, she provides insight into a dynamic field of mainly domestic supermarkets struggling with supply-and-demand challenges. Leaving the urban realm, Michael Spies analyzes complex processes of change that have reshaped local farming systems in northern Pakistan. In applying an assemblage approach, he argues that, while existing policies promote agricultural intensification, empirical findings indicate certain processes of de-intensification – calling for more holistic takes to better understand local farming practices.

All three contributions rely on extensive qualitative fieldwork, in particular qualitative interviews. Spies and Bonaker each conducted 11 months of field research during multiple stays in northern Pakistan and Delhi respectively. Hobelsberger spent five months in the field in Dhaka. Bonaker, for example, outlines that she spent much of her time in Delhi engaging in "participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations with staff of the NGO kitchen, food distributors, students, school staff, parents, and workers of the two welfare NGOs." Spies visited all the villages in his study region for participant observation and to informally chat with the people living there. Hobelsberger met with supermarket founders and managers on-site.

The fourth contribution, by Charlotte Stirn, Martin Maier, and Olaf Bubenzer, is a Physical Geography one, reviewing the methods and results of existing studies on the anthropogenic impact of arsenic mobility in groundwater. The study team outlines that a whole set of different approaches can be used by geographers and by researchers from neighboring disciplines. Yet, tracing levels of arsenic in a region relies first and foremost on a large number of groundwater samples and, thus, access to the field and extensive fieldwork are crucial too. As such, all contributions relied on getting close to local people in order to gain in-depth knowledge of specific situations and developments. We underline this fact because it all happened in a pre-COVID-19 world.

COVID-19 in South Asia

Conducting empirical research in South Asia has, meanwhile, become impossible due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the end of 2020, a total of 11,401,725 persons had been diagnosed with COVID-19 in all South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) member states — with the death toll having reached 166,739 by that point in time (SAARC 2020). India has been affected most severely, with more than ten million cases and over 140,000 deaths. In relation to population size, other South Asian countries have been less affected by now.

First cases were detected early during the pandemic in nearly all South Asian countries, being well documented. In Nepal, for example, the first patient — a student who had returned from Wuhan — was treated on January 13, 2020, in a hospital in Kathmandu (Shrestha et al. 2020). The number of cases in the country developed slowly, peaking in October with roughly 5,000 new infections per day (Johns Hopkins CRC 2020). In India, the first COVID-19 patient was a returnee from Wuhan as well, who was treated in a hospital in Thrissur on January 27, 2020, (Andrews et al. 2020). Yet the number of infected persons would grow exponentially from April, in spite of a very strict and early-announced lockdown (Ram et al. 2020). In September 2020, the number of new infections peaked at 100,000 new cases being reported daily. Since then, the number of newly reported cases has declined steadily — but still remains at a very high level regardless (23,950 new cases on December 22 according to Johns Hopkins CRC 2020).

There have been several attempts made to explain why other South Asian countries were less affected by the pandemic than India was, in spite of having similar conditions regarding population density (especially in urban centers), population structure, and the health system. One argument is that in South Asia's smaller countries the number of undetected cases is higher, as test capacities are relatively low (Thakur 2020) — although this can also be assumed to be the case for India too (Chatterjee 2020). For Nepal, it has been speculated that the high coverage of *Bacillus Calmette–Guérin* (BCG) vaccination against tuberculosis (TB) might be an explanation for relatively low case numbers (Thakur 2020).

All South Asian governments imposed strict and lengthy lockdowns as well as restrictions on public life. They were driven mainly by the fear of the collapse of already-overburdened health systems, which foreseeably did not have sufficient numbers of personnel nor the financial and infrastructural resources to adequately respond to the pandemic (Chalise 2020; Atif and Malik 2020). Other measures taken were the setting up of test and quarantine facilities, travel restrictions, and programs to bring back citizens — especially low- and semi-skilled remittance senders. In March, the SAARC countries developed joint health-monitoring activities and initiated an emergency fund (Sharma et al. 2020). Yet, these measures still could not stop the spread of the pandemic.

Among the factors contributing to the virus's fast spread, the high population density — especially in cities — was a contributing factor. In such a situation it is hardly possible for urban populations to keep a prescribed physical distance, and the lack of infrastructure — both in rural and urban areas — does not allow for following basic hygiene standards. Yet despite this general problem, the risk of becoming infected with COVID-19 shows significant intra-urban variability (Mishra et al. 2020). This can be explained by disparities in health literacy among the urban populations, who do not apply related basic protective measures in an effective way (Ali et al. 2020; Ferdous et al. 2020). In some locations, the stigmatization of health personnel in general and of persons diagnosed positive with COVID-19 in particular have been reported (Poudel and Subedi 2020).

In addition to the acute overload of the health systems, several negative secondary effects have also emerged herewith. These are endangering the progress made regarding population health in the last few years: Persons diagnosed with TB do not receive their medication regularly anymore, and the pausing of vaccination campaigns threatens the goal of a polio-free South Asia (Chandir et al. 2020; Gosh et al. 2020). The number of psychiatric disorders is rising steeply (Choudhari 2020; Gosh et al. 2020), resulting in an increased ratio of suicides. The income losses of the poorest strata of society directly translate into an increase of people suffering from acute hunger. Especially vulnerable are, in this context, internal migrants and the inhabitants of remote areas, such as the Himalayas (Ali et al. 2020; Choudhari 2020).

Even with the pandemic still unfolding, it is foreseeable that the economic consequences will be devastating. Projections show a mean shrinking of the economy by 5 percent, while the number of impoverished households will rise by 15 percent (Laborde et al. 2020: 17f.). Thus the pandemic will result in a disruption of the development pathways of the poorest, who are employed in precarious working conditions and hardly have any resources to compensate for the hardships induced by the pandemic. The long-term outcomes for South Asian societies cannot be predicted yet, but it is not too daring to say that COVID-19 will be a cesura for the region and its development.

Geographical research and the pandemic

What form, then, can geographical research in South Asia take in the circumstances? Do we really have an alternative to pausing data collection during the pandemic? Without question, the latter has jeopardized all kinds of empirical work. Planning and conducting empirical research, taken for granted in previous years, is currently impossible — not only for scholars from German-speaking countries but also for our partners in South Asia too. Thus researchers who started their particular project prior to the pandemic can consider themselves lucky to be able to build upon their already-collected data. Others might have the phone

numbers of former study participants, enabling them to contact them again and to digitally conduct another round of interviews.

In this context, Detlef Müller-Mahn proposed during a symposium on COVID-19 held virtually in July 2020 to think of “new forms of remote sensing” — by which he means to more strongly rely on digital means of data collection. Researchers can, for example, shoot short videos on particular issues and send them to their interview partners beforehand. In the interview situation that follows, they can refer to these videos and use them to stir their interviewees to reflect on the discussed issues more deeply. However, digital means — including telephone interviews, video chats, and the like — are, in our eyes, no equivalents to fieldwork. Such measures might work for researchers who find themselves already embedded in strong networks with relevant contact persons, ones established prior to the pandemic’s onset. For those who aim to approach new topics in a region where they might have never been before, however, such means seem to be of limited usefulness.

Given the difficulties that the pandemic is imposing on researchers worldwide, we think we can learn something more general from the current situation: the value of Geography’s regional and transregional competence. Whereas “regional geography” as a paradigm was abandoned already some 50 years ago now, the current global pandemic provides the grounds for revaluating the importance and meaning of regionally specific knowledge and comparisons. In fact, Geography would witness a turning away from “landscape” and “region” as study subjects and see instead an embracing of theory work and conceptual thinking in both Human and Physical Geography. This would trigger a highly productive phase of generating analytic output from the 1990s onward, leading to the growing exchange of theories with neighboring disciplines. Without question, Geography would not have stayed where it is today without this process of detaching itself from some of its traditional roots. As has been rightly stated recently, this process allowed for a constant renewal and extension of the discipline and for a transformation of Geography into a relevant earth-system science, rooted in parallel in the Natural and Social Sciences (Schurr and Weichhart 2020; Weichhart 2001).

Yet, despite this necessary renewal process, regional expertise still matters in today’s world. This can be seen from the fact that 13 of the 55 study groups of the German Society of Geography are regionally oriented. Geography and other area studies have even gained in importance in a globalized and increasingly interconnected world; we see at least four reasons for that:

(1) Knowing about and understanding processes *at the other end of the world* is not only *nice to have* but undoubtedly necessary in a globalized world, as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic compellingly shows. Geographers need to understand what is going on in different regions of the world and have competences in contextualizing these developments.

(2) The rise of social media has led to the spread of unfounded statements, undifferentiated stereotypes, conspiracy theories, and overt incitements of violence. Whereas hopes were high in the 1990s that digitization would lead to a new wave of democratization around the world, the opposite development has since taken place. Democracies are under siege today, and authoritarianism, xenophobia, and racism are phenomena now gaining renewed strength in countries of the Global North and South alike. Against this background, Geography with its regional expertise can contribute to countering reductionist worldviews on “the others” and to working for a more nuanced representation of facts and processes.

(3) Most importantly, we see regional expertise as one of the fundamental building blocks for theory development. Too often, theoretical concepts are rooted in the experiences gained in case studies from the Global North, while countries and regions in the Global South only appear as the “field” for testing these theories in a different context. From our point of view, an emancipatory discipline like Geography needs to start from the plurality of the world as its premise so that the unequal geography of theory can be successively undermined and overcome (Roy and Ong 2011; Keck 2019). Regionally oriented study groups within the discipline can serve this end.

(4) Last but not least, regionally oriented study groups with their contextual competences are important forums for intradisciplinary dialogue. The discussion and mutual exchange among scholars on different societal and ecological factors influencing the development of specific regions is profitable for all involved. That aside, these interactions are without question necessary for a Geography that wants to substantially contribute to the mitigation of and adaptation to global environmental change.

Conclusion

This edited volume opens — as always — a window to the past, allowing for perspectives on pre-COVID-19 South Asia. It is based on empirical material collected before international travel and data collection with or by research partners in South Asia was rendered impossible. While established researchers will still be able to make use of data collected earlier for some time to come, it is challenging to witness from a distance the ongoing transformations in the region that many call their second home. Working empirically in South Asia will change through this pandemic — probably, the number of trips will be reduced and a share of interactions will move to the digital space. But direct exposure to the field will remain a necessity. First-hand experiences are an irreplaceable precondition for regional knowledge — itself key to understanding our increasingly interconnected world.

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Carsten Butsch is currently working as an interim professor at the Department of Geography, University of Bonn. His research focusses on development studies, health geography, risk geography and migration research with India and Germany as most relevant research areas. Since 2011 he is co-speaker of the South Asia Study Group.

butschc@uni-koeln.de, ORCID: 0000-0002-7152-8318

Alexander Follmann is post-doctoral researcher and lecturer at the Institute of Geography and the Global South Studies Center, University of Cologne. His research foci include urban and regional development, peri-urban dynamics and human-environment interaction in India, Kenya and Germany. He is co-speaker of the South Asia Study Group.

a.follmann@uni-koeln.de, ORCID: 0000-0002-4727-4346

Markus Keck is postdoctoral associate of the Global South Studies Center, University of Cologne and guest researcher at the Faculty of Geoscience and Geography, University of Göttingen. He is principal investigator of a project on genetically engineered cotton in India, funded by the German Research Foundation, and co-speaker the South Asia Study Group.

markus.keck@uni-koeln.de, ORCID: 0000-0002-6152-097X

Judith Müller is a postdoctoral associate at the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University and at the Center for Humans and Technology at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology. Her research is focused on Ladakh (India) and on human-water interactions. She is co-speaker of the South Asia Study Group.

judith.mueller@uni-heidelberg.de