

IIAS Reports

International conference report South Asia and the Long 1930s: Appropriations and Afterlives

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ON 6 AND 7 DECEMBER 2013, the international conference ‘South Asia and the Long 1930s: Appropriations and Afterlives’, was convened in Leiden. Conceptualised by an expanding and amorphous collective of historians of modern South Asia at the Leiden University, the conference was organised jointly by Prof. Nira Wickramasinghe and Dr. Sanjukta Sunderason from the Leiden Institute for Area Studies (LIAS) and Dr. Carolien Stolte from the Institute for History. The conference received generous funding support from the Dutch Royal Academy of Sciences, the Asian Modernities and Traditions research profile of Leiden University, the LIAS, the IIAS and the Leiden University Fund. It brought together South Asianists across disciplines and research specialisations to focus on the complex forms and terrains of the political, social and cultural currents of 1930s. Yet the scope of the conference spanned beyond South Asia, and the organisers were fortunate to be able to include experts from other regions to engage with the currents and resonances of the 1930s. As a result, all panels benefited from discussants who provided inputs from the Middle Eastern, European, British, and Chinese perspectives. Showcasing modern South Asian studies in Leiden as well as opening up South Asia to thematic dialogues from other regions (and area studies perspectives) was one of the driving forces behind the conference.

The three panels in this two-day conference elaborated upon themes that can be seen to frame the 1930s: International Affinities, Aesthetics and Politics, the Market and the Ordinary. Reflecting research specialisations of the three key organisers, the panels were chaired by Carolien Stolte, Sanjukta Sunderason, and Nira Wickramasinghe respectively. The first conference day kicked off with two sessions on ‘International Affinities’. This theme was selected to shed light on the long-distance networks that had emerged in the aftermath of the First World War, the establishment of the League of Nations and the Bolshevik Revolution. Whether working towards world

federation, religious revival, or national independence, and whether based on ties of friendship, solidarity or ideology, individuals and groups in this period sought new blueprints for a world of greater justice and equality. In particular, the organisers felt that while these networks were marked by considerable ideological flexibility throughout the 1920s, the 1930s experienced a sharper drawing of ideological boundaries. Earlier histories of South Asia have often subordinated these engagements to national narratives. These sessions, by contrast, sought to examine these networks and affinities in their full international dimensions.

This internationalist enthusiasm was evident in the paper by Michele Louro of Salem State University, who spoke on the League against Imperialism. Rather than looking at the League’s formative years, she focused on the changing relationship between working class mobilisation and bourgeois nationalism in the 1930s. While this development closed some routes for the League’s Indian members, it also enabled the formation of new anti-imperialist networks. Ben Zachariah of Heidelberg University took up a different political divide of this period through the lens of Indian exiles in Germany. Berlin played host to persons whose contacts and connections, engagements, politics and personal relationships ranged across the world at a time of tumultuous change and potential revolution. Several Indian communists spent their formative years in Berlin, but many others were genuinely interested in the potential of fascism for Indian politics. Rahul Nair of Gwinnett College continued several themes from this discussion by showing how, in the long 1930s, sexual and reproductive practices were included in discourses of nation-building. He also showed how the public debates around this issue were part of an international discourse on sex, eugenics, birth control and population. Asiya Alam from Yale addressed the intersection of social reform and internationalism in a different sphere, through Iqbalunnisa Hussain’s engagements with both international feminism and local reform. Finally, there was room for how international politics intersected with regional issues as well. Uma Ganesan of Berea College Kentucky, spoke on the Self-Respect Movement in South India. She raised the question as to whether we might see this movement not just as anti-imperialist, but also as anti-national. Her paper showed that the 1930s saw a development in which the class and caste radicalism of the movement gradually gave way to an ethno-linguistic focus in which an Aryan North was pitted against a Dravidian South. Ali Raza and Franziska Roy, both of the ZMO Berlin, delivered a joint paper on the Khaksar Movement, whose rise coincided with a proliferation of paramilitary and uniformed volunteer groups. Providing a social history of the Khaksars rather than an analysis of the movement’s leader Mashriqi, they were able to focus on the changing political alignments of the 1930s.

The second conference theme, entitled ‘Aesthetics and Politics’, examined new patterns and vocabularies of cultural radicalism and ‘front-making’ with artists, writers, performers, academics and journalists in the 1930s. This theme was chosen for the new imperatives of cultural production that emerged in this period, bolstered with ideals and ideologies of anti-fascism, socialist romanticism, anti-imperialism, and nationalist populism. Under the catchword of ‘progressive’ art, realism was intertwined with modernism, activating notions of the social, the formal, the everyday and the national-popular. South Asian scholarship is still in the process of researching and rethinking the artistic and ideological lives of the ideal of ‘progressive’ culture, and the next six speakers of the conference explored these new cultural imaginaries in art, literature and performance.

Three of the papers in this session dealt with cinema. Madhumita Lahiri of Warwick University spoke on the early years of sound in Indian cinema, in particular the social film. Specifically targeted to move audience to outrage, in particular on issues of untouchability and forced marriage, this genre sought to inculcate rational forms of spectatorship. Sound – live-location rather than non-synchronous – was a vital part of this viewer commitment. Similar themes were raised by Rachel Ball of Boston College, who showed how progressive social and political messages were conveyed in Marathi cinema through the use of religious figures. These films were deliberately marketed as devotional films in

order to reach a broader audience. Suzanne Schultz of the University of Texas at Austin, focused on 1930s cinema halls and spectators rather than the films themselves. Her careful examination of Ali Sardar Jafri’s *Lucknow ki Paanch Raaten* suggests that cinema, much like the progressive writers’ meetings and student rallies, were sites where social(ist), political, and literary sentiments coalesced. Ali Kamran of the University of Texas at Austin further elaborated upon this last issue by speaking on the Progressive Writers Association itself, and their understudied relationship with the first Soviet Writer’s Congress of 1934. His paper showed that similarities of aesthetic and literary themes between South Asia and the Soviet Union continued and increased into the 1940s. Maia Ramnath of Pennsylvania State likewise spoke on the Progressive Writers, and more specifically on the movement’s co-founder Mulk Raj Anand. By focusing on his engagement with the Spanish Civil War, Ramnath’s paper continued the conference’s examination of the close relationship between the literary, artistic, and progressive internationalist realms of the 1930s. Rashna Nicholson of the University of Munich, finally, moved the discussion into the realm of theatre by examining Parsi plays and the concerns of the Parsi community they reflect. Her paper showed that the plays of the late 1920s and early 1930s demonstrate a transition from communal self-glorification to a collective fear of what decolonisation would bring.

The third theme of the conference, ‘the Market and the Ordinary’, examined the impact of economic depression and mounting social tensions of the 1930s. In many ways, South Asia carried the brunt of the economic depression that had engulfed the world. For instance, Indian immigrant labour witnessed racial violence from Burma to Ceylon, and was often sent back home as a result of restrictive labour policies. Yet we know little about the way common people experienced these times in their everyday lives, in particular the effects of state and market in shaping the ordinary. Held on the second day of the conference, this session examined the market-driven modernity sponsored by modern imperialism and the effects of market induced practices of exclusion and inclusion upon a variety of social formations from workers, peasants and traders to women, ‘lower castes’ and modern consumers.

This session’s first speaker was Daniel Rycroft of the University of East Anglia, whose paper addressed the political, cosmological and visual orientations of 1930s Indian anthropology. Using the concept of ‘interworld’, he showed that the representation of Adivasi heritage in this era was an intricate dialogue between images of primitivism, policies of integration and narratives of conflict. Daniel Bass of Southern Connecticut State University also elaborated on representations of ethnicity, in this case by looking at the societal transformations taking place in late colonial Ceylon. Mass labour struggles, as well as the introduction of universal suffrage, cemented ethnicity as a main identifier in this period. This severely impacted possibilities of class solidarity, making the 1930s the tipping point for the gradual ethnicisation of politics in Sri Lanka. Idrees Kanth of Leiden University continued the theme of political representation. He analysed the evolving discourse of rights in Kashmir in the wake of Indian Muslim responses to colonial intervention in the area. Abigail McGowan of the University of Vermont, finally, moved the discussion into the Bombay Presidency, exploring changes in the social and domestic sphere through the large-scale introduction of new goods in the 1930s. This celebration of new global commodity flows contrasted sharply with the contemporaneous khadi movement and prompts us to rethink the domestication of the global ‘modern’ in consumer aesthetics.

The conference ended with a final roundtable session titled ‘Making the Unfamiliar Familiar: Stories from the South’, designed specifically to draw together a cross-regional, inter-disciplinary dialogue around archives and narratives from the global South. The roundtable started with a keynote by Fredrick Cooper of New York University, whose talk was entitled ‘Making the Familiar Unfamiliar: Retelling Empire Stories’. Through a provoking examination of British and French imperial strategies, as two among a much wider and non-Eurocentric repertoire of empire-building, he showed that the history of the European empires is far from a tale of progression and modular nationalism. After the keynote, four faculty members of Leiden University provided comments from the perspective of their own regions of study. This provided a perfect opportunity to launch a final discussion on the outcomes of the conference days, and the new ways of viewing the long 1930s opened up by the presentations. In this discussion, the feedback by Susan Pennybacker (University of North Carolina) and Jane Burbank (New York University) was especially valuable. The organisers hope and feel this conference was successful in contextualising the international flow of ideas, commodities and affinities that marked the interwar period, and in rethinking not only the 1930s themselves but also the afterlives of this decade within the unfolding dialectics of decolonisation in South Asia.

