

## THE IDEA OF SOUTH ASIA

Journée du Centre d'Etudes de l'Inde et de l'Asie du Sud  
Research Group "Of Borders and Boundaries"

**13 November 2012 - Room 638-641**

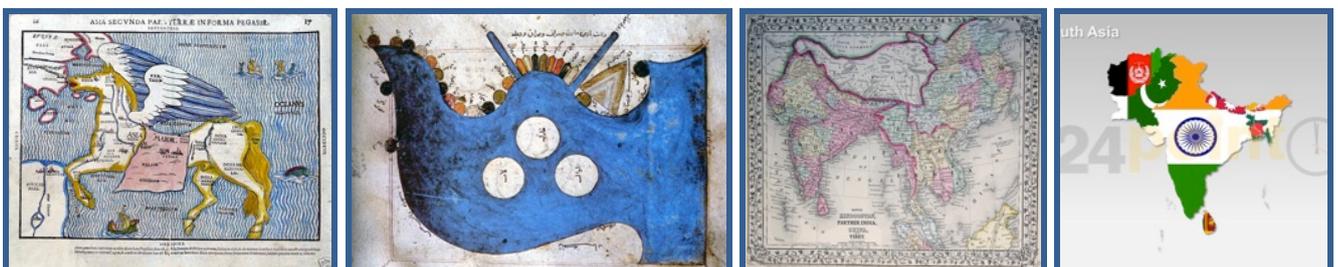
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South Asia, another name for the Indian Subcontinent, is a recent concept (only about six decades old), forged outside the region in the wake of the establishment of area studies by American universities. While it may be preferred to *Indian subcontinent* for its political neutrality, it is nonetheless a contested concept, both externally and internally. Whether in South Asia itself or in international institutions or research centres outside the region, there is no general consensus about the countries the concept encompasses: it primarily refers to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives, as per the definition of the SAARC, which has however included Afghanistan lately (2005) among its members. Some would also include Burma (Myanmar) as it was a province of British India till 1937. Internally, the concept is contested on the political level but in a fairly paradoxical way: on the one hand, as a concept closely associated with India, it is in some contexts rejected by its neighbours; on the other hand, neighbouring countries (especially Nepal and Sri Lanka) have been instrumental in making the concept exist through the creation of journals, associations, and websites that mobilise the term.

Although "South Asia" is used more by international institutions and scholars than by local populations, this category is still highly meaningful as people across the region share fairly common social, cultural (clothing, food, the popularity of Bollywood...), linguistic and religious practices that traverse national boundaries.. The regular crossing of borders, within the region, is also another case in point of how individuals and groups make this category exist on an almost daily basis.

Beside these practices, some individuals and groups, in South Asia and in diaspora, actively contribute to building the idea of South Asia in the wake of tense relations between the countries of the region (mainly between India and Pakistan but also between India and other neighbouring countries). These "good-will" cross-border discourses and practices, which have been insufficiently studied, deserve more attention. Who are these actors? Beyond defusing political tensions, what are the other characteristics of their discourses? What type of cross-border practices do they engage into? What is their agenda? How do they rethink (the former) British India before the creation of contemporary borders? Is this a form of rethinking of the region along pre-Partition borders and beyond nationalism and nation-states? Is this an example of a contemporary use of the past? Is there any such thing as a South Asian identity? If so, how and when is it expressed? To further engage with this category in a comparative perspective, this conference will also include a discussion about the ways in which other areas have reflected upon the delimitation of their own space through the example of Iran.





## PROGRAMME

*9h30: Morning Tea/Coffee*

9h50: Welcome address and introduction (Blandine Ripert, CNRS)

### Deconstructing South Asia and beyond

Chair: Denis Matringe (CNRS)

10h: "South Asia": An (Un)Contested Category (Aminah Mohammad-Arif, CNRS)

*10h30: Tea/Coffee break*

10h45: India that is Bharat: An On-going Debate on a Strange Equation (Catherine Clémentin-Ojha, EHESS)

11h15: The "Iranian world" between the Turkish, Arab, Indian and European Lands: The Quest for Identity. (Bernard Hourcade, CNRS)

**11h45: Discussion Sanjay Subrahmanyam (UCLA)**

*12h30: Lunch break*

### Perceptions, Representations and Actors

Chair: Eric Meyer (INALCO)

14h: Thinking India in South Africa: Gandhi's Conundrum (Claude Markovits, CNRS)

14h30: The Strange Love of the Land: Identity, Poetry and Politics in South Asia (Sudipta Kaviraj, Columbia University. Paper read by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, UCLA)

*15h: Tea/Coffee break*

15h15: South Asianism: The Diasporic Construction of a Category or an Ideology? (Anouck Carsignol, CSH)

15h45: People's SAARC: Building a South Asian Identity from Below (Sudha Ramachandran, Kulturstudier, Puducherry, invited by the Franco-Indian programme of the FMSH)

**16h15: Keynote Address and Discussion, Tariq Ali (Historian, Novelist, Filmmaker)**

## ABSTRACTS

### **“South Asia”: An (Un)Contested Category (Aminah Mohammad-Arif)**

In this paper, I will first interrogate “South Asia” as a concept by discussing the major debates and stakes that highlight how contested this category is, both internally and externally. These debates and stakes are of course not confined to mere geographical or strategic issues but largely extend to ideological ones as well. To further deconstruct the category, I will then adopt an empirical perspective, and use the preliminary results of exploratory fieldwork conducted in Bangalore on the meaningfulness of the concept for local populations (mainly Muslims) and their identification with this space.

### **India that is Bharat: An On-going Debate on a Strange Equation (Catherine Clémentin-Ojha)**

At the time of independence, the terms India, Hind, Hindustan and Bharat coexisted; but they were not interchangeable: their meaning and usage were context- and language-sensitive. In 1949, the drafters of the Constitution put an end to this plurality when they decided that the country would be legally known by two names: India and Bharat: “India that is Bharat shall be a union of states” (Article one). In this juridico-political conception, India and Bharat were meant to be interchangeable notions. I will try to identify and describe the transformations which allowed these two terms to be considered as equivalents, and to be used as such. This will then be related to the larger discussion on South Asia.

### **The "Iranian world" between Turkish, Arab, Indian and European Lands: The Quest for Identity (Bernard Hourcade)**

Central place of no-man’s land? The Iranian world, located on arid highlands between the plains of the Indus and Mesopotamia, is the heart of ancient and prestigious civilizations. In the 5th century BC Indo-European populations settled on this plateau built the first empire of human history. This location and glorious history have given Iranians a feeling of pride and of being surrounded by hostile populations and powers that have invaded their homeland – *sarzamin-e irân* -- many times. The cultural, social and political identity of the very diverse “Iranian world” was built on a cultural basis, on the prestige of the Persian language and literature, but politically, these lands were buffer states between the Ottoman, Russian and Indo-British empires. Scholars and academics studying ancient Iran played a great role in the making of the “Iranian world” as a central and principal cultural area, but modern economic and political history have never given Iran, Afghanistan or the Persian-influenced states of Central Asia a central place in the dynamics of change in the 19th and 20th centuries. Will this remain the same in the 21st century?

### **Thinking India in South Africa: Gandhi’s Conundrum (Claude Markovits)**

India, as a political construct, was partly the product of the imagination of diasporic Indians, but this has rarely been recognized in the existing literature. While the most important figure of Indian nationalism, Gandhi, spent some twenty years of his life in South Africa, the South African input in his political career has tended to be minimized. The paper does not directly address that problem, but seeks instead to draw attention to the way in which Gandhi continued, during the whole of his South African sojourn, to “think India”. In a first phase, the fight for political rights for Indians in Natal was seen by Gandhi as upholding the dignity of India within the British Empire, by ensuring that its sons were treated as Crown subjects endowed with certain rights. In a second phase, the fight moved to Transvaal and aimed at defending the honour of the country by opposing measures that degraded the local Indians. In a third phase, Gandhi saw South Africa as a kind of laboratory where experiments in struggle could be conducted that could be at a later stage replicated in India. During his entire stay, Gandhi never lost sight of the meaning of his struggles for India. Which leads to the question of the exact meaning of the term “India” for him. Did he conceive of it as a closed or as an open category, and can we read there some kind of pre-figuration of a broader notion such as “South Asia”? The rich corpus of Gandhi’s South African writings will be interrogated to try to answer that question.

### **The Strange Love of the Land: Identity, Poetry and Politics in South Asia (Sudipta Kaviraj)**

In this paper I shall try to explore how the idea of space in what we call South Asia today got reconfigured by modernity. I shall explore three spatial conceptions of South Asia – a strategic, a geographic and a cultural version; and I shall try to explain the patterns of space-thinking underlying each one of them, and show their connection with modernity, and observe why and how South Asia is still not a space that can be conceived in nationalistic or state terms as a space of belonging.

Spaces or space-terms are constituted by purposes. South Asia emerged in the 1950-60s as an academic-governmental term of American coinage designating a spatial area of concern about American strategy and foreign policy – as an external term : i.e, a term by which outsiders designated a territory for some purposes significant for them, but devoid of any affective significance for its inhabitants. By contrast, in British and European discourse, this term was relatively rare, or absent. They saw this area as primarily the space of two states, India and Pakistan, born out of a unified British colonial India.

Two political processes of modernity introduce a new kind of space-making – nationalism and state-formation. In the paper, I shall follow some significant points of this dual process – of the emergence of new state structures – of British colonial India- and its animation of the rise of variant forms of nationalism – in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, in the Islamic imagination of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and eventually through the institution of state-nationalisms in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. These state forms and gestalts of affect make it impossible to think of South Asia as a space of emotional inhabitation – like India or Pakistan.

Yet, despite this state-nationalist borders of consciousness, there still exist long-term historical commonalities which people spontaneously practice and enjoy – in food, material culture, literature, art, music – which have a deep and long history. This marks peoples of this region (not states) by a common intelligibility which is reflected in their easy commingling when outside their countries, and free of the pressures of state nationalism, or in artistic public spheres. There is much to be said for a revival of this pre-modern world of frontiers, where people knew how to live their lives outside the coercive containers of nation-state which unsuccessfully mimic forms of European modernity.

### **South Asianism: The Diasporic Construction of a Category or an Ideology? (Anouck Carsignol)**

The process of nation-building is not only shaped and claimed by nationals and residents, but also by members of the diaspora, who contest and redefine its imaginary borders. While some transnational movements promote an exclusive and homogeneous ideology based on territorial nationalism, others participate in the fragmentation of the nation on the basis of regional particularisms. On the contrary, migrants who define themselves as South Asians, or '*Desis*', tend to transcend subnational frontiers and state borders in the name of a pan-regional identity referring to India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bhutan, including sometimes Afghanistan and the Maldives. Beyond a common origin or ethnicity anchored in the Indian subcontinent, 'South Asianism' became a form of progressive political consciousness and radical activism, mobilised against racial discrimination and socio-economic injustice.

What does 'being South Asian' mean today? This contribution, based on extensive fieldwork conducted in India and the diaspora, combined with reflections on diasporic and post-colonial literature, and an in-depth analysis of South Asian virtual networks, explores the construction of 'South Asianism' as a diasporic category and ideology, and examines the limits of '*Desi politics*'. The diaspora is traditionally seen at worst, as a source of internal conflict, at best, as an instrument of long-distance nationalism. Instead, it is argued that the dissenting voices from South Asian diasporic activists not only play a role in the current debate on the definition of the nation, but also, participate in the peace-making process, the consolidation of democracy and the reinforcement of pluralism, both in their host society and within the sub-continent.

### **People's SAARC: Building a South Asian Identity from Below (Sudha Ramachandran)**

This paper examines the role of 'People's SAARC' (PSAARC), a coalition of non-government organizations (NGOs), trade unions and people's movements from eight South Asian countries, in building a South Asian solidarity and identity. PSAARC sees itself as a people's movement. It seeks to build an alternative, people-centric regionalism and to this end is building cross-border solidarity towards addressing common problems of the South Asian masses. Ideologically, PSAARC is opposed to neo-liberal economic policies and supports secularism and democratization of the region. After providing a brief overview of PSAARC's history and the context in which it emerged, the paper will examine the movement's composition in terms of the nature of organizations and people involved. Through interviews with activists who are involved in PSAARC's activities, the paper will attempt a profile of PSAARC in terms of the age, class, gender, level of education and political affiliations of its members. How representative is PSAARC of the South Asian masses? The paper will seek to understand the reasons why people engage in PSAARC's activities. What are the motivations behind building a South Asian identity from below? How does South Asian solidarity enhance their interests or take forward the causes their NGOs are seeking to further? Drawing on the experiences of these activists, the paper will throw light on how they build bridges across borders and engage with each other as well as the obstacles they encounter. The paper will also explore PSAARC's achievements and the impact of its activities. It will examine whether PSAARC has been able to enhance public awareness of the need for building South Asian solidarity.