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India at 70: Introduction to the BASAS 2017 Special Issue

Filippo Boni¹ and Diego Maiorano²

Abstract

This introduction to the 2017 Annual Conference of the British Association for South Asian Studies offers an overview of the collection of selected articles presented at the conference. Overall, the Special issue consists of six articles, including four research articles addressing a wide range of topics spanning from the role of women during the Emergency rule (1975-1977) to the difficult relationship between minorities and the Hindu majority in recent years, and two viewpoint articles. These viewpoints touch on two extremely important and timely topics: Urvashi Butalia, who was the keynote speaker at the conference, looks at Partition and at the importance of survivors in preserving the memory of such a momentous event, whereas Deborah Sutton addresses the articulation of Hindu nationalist views in the scholarship of the 'Ghent School'. The introduction to the Special Issue also highlights how the research presented in this collection can offer comparative insights to broader phenomena occurring in other regions alike.

Key Words: Partition, Beef Bans, Dalits, Caste, Ghent School, Emergency

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This special issue of Contemporary South Asia is dedicated to the papers presented at the 2017 Annual Conference of the British Association for South Asian Studies (BASAS). This year the Conference was co-hosted by The University of Nottingham's Institute of Asia and Pacific Studies and Nottingham Trent University's Centre for Postcolonial Studies. The papers included in this collection provide a glimpse into the vibrant, highly interdisciplinary and stimulating discussions that occurred during the three days of the 2017 BASAS conference.

2017 was an exceptional year for South Asia. On 14th and 15th August, the world celebrated the 70th birthday of India and Pakistan. Their victorious struggle against the British Empire kicked off what is perhaps the most important political process of the 20th century: within a few decades, most of the human race had broken free from their colonial masters, starting a new era of the world's history amid great hopes and expectations. India and Pakistan started their journeys in the wake of what Mahatma Gandhi called 'the vivisection' of the Indian subcontinent. 70 years later, very few remain to narrate to our generation the infinite suffering that partition caused, even though its impact on Indo-Pakistan relations and, perhaps even more importantly, on how Indians and Pakistanis relate to each other is still clearly felt today. We are delighted to be able to begin the collection with Urvashi Butalia's contribution based on her extremely engaging keynote speech 'A Sense of the Past: Reflections on Partition and Memory', delivered on 20th April 2017 at the Annual Conference. Butalia demonstrates the importance of recording the Partition stories of survivors, now that memories are starting to fade. She also emphasises the key role that Partition archives, theatre activists and non-academic writers have in unearthing Partition stories and preserving their memory for posterity. Partition wounds have not fully healed and the repercussions of what Butalia discussed during her talk are still visible nowadays, with rising levels of tension between Islamabad and New Delhi. No understanding of the present would be possible without a full appreciation of the profound and personal dynamics involved at the time of Partition. The stories reported by

Butalia demonstrate also the global implications and the trans-border impact of the Pakistan-India split.

The five further contributions in this collection address two, interwoven themes that were extensively debated during the conference. The first one, to which several panels were dedicated, is the urgent need to adopt a 'gender' lens to the study of South Asia. In this context, Gemma Scott's article provides new insights into the role of women's prisoners under Indira Gandhi's emergency rule (1975-77). Scott shows how their time in prison engendered social mobilisation against the authoritarian regime imposed by Mrs Gandhi. The second theme is the uneasy relationship between democracy and minority rights on one side and the increasing challenges to democracy and secularism under the BJP government on the other. The current predicament of India's democracy emerging from the contributions to this special issue is not a unique, isolated case neither in South Asia nor globally. It is rather part of a trend that spans across the countries in the sub-continent and beyond. With regards to the other South Asian countries, Pakistan's democratic trajectory is at yet another critical juncture. In July 2017, Pakistan's Supreme Court dealt an important blow to the country's democratic transition by ousting the then Prime Minister, Mr Nawaz Sharif, on corruption grounds, in what was largely regarded as a politically-motivated ruling aimed at weakening Pakistan's civilian government. In the Maldives, President Abdulla Yameen declared a state of emergency in the country in February 2018, following a Supreme Court ruling invalidating the convictions of nine members of the opposition and instructing the government to free those in prison. In Bangladesh, the Sheikh Hasina government's attempts to curb Islamic militancy in the country resulted in a dramatic reduction of the space for dissent and a decrease in civil liberties, through the implementation of Section 57 of the Information and Communication Technology (Amendment) Act. A quick glimpse into the world beyond the sub-continent and we find that, time and again, challenges to democracy are very much at the heart of the political dynamics

of even very established and stable democracies. Far-right, populist governments are governing Austria and Hungary; in France, the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen managed to go through to the second round of the French Presidential elections in May 2017, in which she obtained nearly 34% of the overall vote; on the Southern side of the Alps, the populist Five Star Movement in Italy – recently condemned by Reporters Sans Frontiers for their attacks on the freedom of expression – emerged as the largest party at the March 2018 elections, campaigning on an extremely populist agenda. Donald Trump, on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, is undermining both domestic and international institutions in an unprecedented way.

As this cursory overview demonstrates, challenges to democracy and minority rights are some of the key themes that lie at the heart of contemporary politics and that are widely debated in the current academic literature, going well beyond the context-specific remit of South Asian Studies. As such, the papers that we include in this collection, while offering new perspectives and insights into the India-specific dynamics, speak to broader global phenomena.

The very existence of democracy in India was challenged to a great extent during Indira Gandhi's emergency rule (1975-1977), the period in which Gemma Scott's paper, the first of our special collection, is situated. Against such backdrop, Scott sheds light on the role of women prisoners during the Emergency. This is an important, yet overlooked, aspect of the most authoritarian period in India's history since independence. Drawing on a wealth of written exchanges (primarily in the form of letters) to and from female political prisoners in Maharashtra, Scott overcomes the dominant narrative which sees these women prisoners merely as victims of the Emergency. On the contrary, Scott looks at the prison as a space in which women's politicisation and anti-Emergency activism occur.

Three papers of this collection look at how minorities and marginalised segments of Indian society are being treated, in what is becoming an increasingly 'ethnic state' under the

BJP government. Balmurli Natrajan's contribution addresses the debates around beef-bans imposed in India and anti-caste activism, with a specific focus on Dalit mobilisation against the ban. In this article, Natrajan argues against the culturalisation of caste, what he defines 'the culture trap', offering an alternative reading of the beef festivals aimed at promoting a better understanding of the dynamics of casteism at work in the beef bans.

Dalits, and their responses to the beef ban, are also at the heart of Gopika Jadeja's article. In her work, Jadeja focuses on the Dalit response, both by activists and poets, to the proscription against beef. Throughout the article, the author shows how poetry gives expression to the Dalit response to the disgust associated with the consumption of beef. The geographical focus of the paper is on the western Indian state of Gujarat and through the use of literary and anthropological works on and from the region, Jadeja illuminates how Dalit poetry challenges Hindu nationalism and the Hindutva imaginary of India.

The second paper in the special issue looking at the marginalised in India is the one by Garima Jaju, which focuses on graduate, post-graduate students and alumni from the recently reformed Aliah University in West Bengal, India. The madrasa students not being able to access the benefits of education (i.e. a stable job) notwithstanding, Jaju finds that the students at the Aliah University are signalling social change by culturally producing their own subjectivities. Emboldened by having gained a degree, the students portray themselves as 'employable' individuals and, as a result, they end up challenging the marginal position they have occupied in the economy and society as 'unemployable persons'. Jaju's work transcends the geographical boundaries of her West Bengal case study and could also be read in a wider comparative perspective looking at the role of madrasa education in other parts of South Asia, including Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Hindu nationalism and postcolonial scholarly debates are widely analysed in Deborah Sutton's contribution to this special issue. In her viewpoint article, Sutton looks at the articulation of Hindu nationalist views in the scholarship of the 'Ghent School', originating from the work of S. N. Balagangadhara of Ghent University in Belgium. In her assessment of this body of work, Sutton discusses the characteristics of the Ghent School and its particular appeal for a Hindu chauvinist politics. In this context, the analysis is articulated around two key themes, caste and the way in which Hindu nationalism and Hindutva are interpreted and presented by authors belonging to the Ghent School. Not only these themes span across the work of the Ghent School but they are also central to political developments in contemporary India.

The introduction to this special issue is by no means exhaustive and provides only a brief snapshot of what the contributions in this collection have to offer to the broader debates and scholarship related to South Asia. To reiterate, the articles included here addressed two crucial themes that lie at the very heart of contemporary debates. First, the need to bring a 'gender' lens and perspective when discussing resistance to authoritarianism. Second, the importance of understanding the challenges to democracy in contemporary India and the precarious equilibrium between the Hindu majority and minority rights. Notwithstanding the context-specific focus of this collection, comparative scholars will certainly find in the conceptual discussions and empirical evidence presented throughout these papers useful, novel material to assess and apply the themes touched upon here across different parts of the world.

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