IIAS reports

Workshop report of 'Harnessing counter-culture to construct identity: mapping Dalit cultural heritage in contemporary India'

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Convened by Ronki Ram (Shaheed Bhagat Singh Professor of Political Science, ICCR Chair Professor of Contemporary India Studies)

THE WORKSHOP, organized by International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) and Leiden University Institute for Area Studies (LIAS) in Leiden, focused on the emergence of Dalit cultural heritage as a counter-culture to the mainstream culture of upper/dominant castes social structure and world view. The Dalit movement adopts various strategies in its tirade against social exclusion and makes concerted efforts for the emancipation and empowerment of the socially excluded. To begin with, the Dalit movement attempted to find a way out of caste discrimination and social exclusion while focusing on social reforms within Hinduism. In the 1930s the movement moved towards building a counter-culture for the sole purpose of offering the downtrodden a distinct social identity different from their tormentors', based either on their forgotten cultural past or through seeking refuge in an egalitarian religion. For quite some time, Dalit social mobility based on cultural assimilation enjoyed a large following, but a strong alternative emerged on the basis of conversion to Buddhism. Another, equally powerful movement became known as Dalit cultural heritage.

India has a credible reputation in preserving varied cultural heritage centers, yet Dalits hardly figure in this preservation scheme. They often attribute their conspicuous absence to their historic exclusion from civil society as well as to the dominant discriminatory social structures that relegated them to the periphery in the name of their so-called low caste. They also allege that their indigenous cultural heritage was deliberately destroyed as well as made oblivious with the clear purpose of denying them any space whatsoever in the corridors of power.

In the concerted efforts of retrieving Dalit cultural heritage, tradition ceases to be a value of the past and modernity loses its aura in the fast acclimatizing present cast in the images of yesterdays. It is in this critical context that tradition and modernity have been acquiring new meanings and nuances, in the advantage of the socially excluded. This has also led to social conflicts between the ex-Untouchables and the hitherto dominant communities, who find the resurfacing Dalit cultural heritage quite hard to digest.

Presentations
Dr. Ram Narayan Rawat *(Forms of Dalit historical narratives in twentieth century north India: the Chanvar Puranic and Adi-Hindu histories)* built a counter thesis to the mainstream historical narratives while critically tracing the origins of the Chamars in the lost cultural narratives of Dalit histories. He underlined the urgency of locating 'diversity of visions' for a graphic understanding of scattered universe(s) of Dalits.

Prof. Badri Narayan's presentation *(Crossing borders: Bhagait folk ballad tradition of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and Nepal)* argues that an alternative non-Brahminical art and cultural tradition has been developing along the Indo-Nepal border. The author built an interesting thesis that highlights the emerging trajectories of Dalit cultural heritage defying artificial state boundaries that separate people of similar cultural ethos and background.

Dr. Eva-Maria Hardtmann's paper *(Dalit women in poetry, art and in the Global Justice Movement)* was inspired by the famous World Social Forum (WSF) held in Mumbai in 2004. What made this World Social Forum rather unique and historic was the participation of Dalit women, who were doubly oppressed and marginalized by both men in the Dalit movement and by the Indian feminist movement.

Prof. Rajiv Lochan's paper *(Finding a voice, instituting memories – rhetoric and ideas in creating and sustaining 'Bahujan-Mulniwasi')* dealt with the critical theme of creating a shared memory of repression and suppression through the agency of the non-political *All-India Backward (SC/St/OBC) and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF)*.

Dr. Meena Dhanda *(Adh Dharm Samaj: the social vision of Darshan Rattan Ravan)* spoke of the emerging leadership of the Valmiki community in Punjab, based on her ethnographic study of its locales, personal interviews with its activists and leadership, and readings of the literature produced within.

Mr. Surinder Singh's presentation *(Dalit cultural heritage in Punjab: a study of Jathera Shrines of the Ad Dharmi community)* explored the phenomenon of how the Dalit of Punjab have been constructing and reconstructing multi-storey shrines as an endeavor to create memorial cultural heritage reflecting their sense of pride.

Prof. Ronki Ram *(The other modernity and forgotten tradition: the resurfacing of Dalit cultural heritage in contemporary India)* talked about the concerted efforts of the historically socially excluded sections of the Indian society, who have been engaged with the herculean task of reviving/inventing their lost cultural heritage at the grass-roots and national levels.

Prof. Sukhadeo Thorat's paper *(Rise of Dalit arts and imagery: instrument of protest and hope)* touched on the rich domain of Dalit visual arts and imagery and the ways it has been rather meticulously deployed as a non-violent method of social protest and viable instrument of hope for the ex-Untouchables in India.

Prof. Ashutosh Kumar began his presentation *(Dalit Deras as critical sites of counter culture: explaining why political parties flock to the Deras)* by raising two sets of questions relating to the lack of 'presence' and 'empowerment' of the Dalit community in the corridors of political power.

Prof. Paramjit S. Judge's presentation *(Dalit culture and identity: valorisation and reconstruction of tradition among the Chamars in Punjab)* revolved around the main issue of how 'virtual wars' between the Chamars and Jats are fought on the internet (YouTube) and how the former have engaged in this process to construct a counter-culture.

Dr. Pramod Kumar's paper *(Dalit identity architecture: from selective adaptation of cultural symbols to the nurturing of exclusive sites)* focused on the selective cultural adaptation of dominant cultural standards by the lower castes and how they also nurture exclusive sites to bargain for equitable representation in both the public and private domains.

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Notes
1 A full outline and discussion of all the presentations can be found in the workshop report, posted on the IIAS website.

Asian borderlands: connections, corridors and communities

Eric de Maaker

Report of the 3rd Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network, held at the National University of Singapore from 11 -13 October 2012.

Organisation
Connections, Corridors and Communities brought together 120 scholars from five continents. The conference was jointly hosted by the Asia Research Institute (ARI) and the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) at the National University of Singapore, and organised with the active support of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS).

Keynote
In his keynote speech, delivered at the opening of the 3rd conference of the IIAS-sponsored Asian Borderlands Research Network, historian David Ludden (New York University) argued that Asia's borderlands are becoming increasingly volatile. As Asia's national state centres gain political and economic clout, the "ubiquitous propriety of territorialism" has its borderlands emerge as peripheral zones. In addition, the "increasingly grotesque inequality" produced by global capitalism creates a rapidly growing number of people who are progressively more deprived and politically marginalised. These social and political consequences of border-making are often overlooked, and Ludden ended his keynote by calling on scholars to explore the link between (impediments to) physical mobility and social and political mobility.

Conference theme and panels
The conference theme emphasised the importance of the movement of people, ideas and goods across Asian borders,

and how such mobility is constitutive and formative towards the emergence of borderlands. *Connections* draw attention to linkages across, as well as among borderlanders. *Corridors* provide paths and networks across and within borderlands. How are these closed, diverted, reopened, or created, and what effects do their dynamics have on the borderlands, as well as beyond? Borderlands produce *communities*. How does spatial location at a border affect community formation and development?

The panels included in the conference engaged with these foci from a variety of theoretical angles and disciplinary perspectives. Panels explored themes such as 'migration and mobility', 'indigeneity, idea flows and media routes', 'landscape, military and diplomacy', 'agrarian expansion and territorial politics' and 'border commodities'. In addition to paper presentations, the conference included two round-table sessions designed for a more interactive format. One of these discussed communities fractured across borders, the other considered the social and political impact of large scale hydro electric dam building across North East India and the Mekong River. All scholarly contributions explored how borders produce marginality and agency, generating both fundamental as well as applied knowledge.

Multidisciplinary perspectives
The desire for an intellectual space that can support the development of multidisciplinary perspectives on Asia's borderlands was indeed a main incentive for the creation of the Asian Borderlands Research Network in 2006. In its search for paradigms that exceed state-centric and region-centric perspectives, the network has received ample support from the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in the Netherlands. The network has consistently attempted to cater to both fundamental as well as applied concerns. This has resulted in sustained engagement with organisations active in the field of international cooperation, such as Panos and Cordaid. In addition, the network has profited from the in-

volvement of scholars located in the regions it focuses on, and of those affiliated with mainstream academic institutions in North America, Europe and Australia. The increasingly large number of submissions that each edition of the conference draws, proves that Asian borderlands are enjoying growing scholarly attention.

4th Borderlands Conference to be held in 2014
Connections, Corridors and Communities received three times more paper proposals than it could accommodate within its three day/two parallel session format. The earlier two editions of the Borderlands Conference were held in Guwahati, India (2008) and in Chiang Mai, Thailand (2010). Given the success of the last conference, bids are now being considered for a 2014 edition – preferably in yet another borderland of Asia.

For more information on the Asian Borderlands Research Network: www.asianborderlands.net and www.facebook.com/AsianBorderlands.

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