

The International Institute for Asian Studies

Baby Krishna has come of age

At the official opening of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) on 13 October 1993, several authorities in the field of Asian Studies expressed their views on the history, nature and future perspective of various dimensions of Asian Studies. In addition to the keynote address by J.F. Staal, 'Concepts of Science in Europe and Asia', which appeared separately as an IIAS-publication in December 1993, the other speeches given on that day appeared in written form in a supplement to the second issue (spring 1994) of the IIAS Newsletter, under the title 'Asian Studies in global perspective'. This latter publication, comprising 24 newspaper-size pages, could be regarded as the birth document of the International Institute for Asian Studies.

Jan E.M. Houben

IN ADDITION to a document attesting to its birth, we also have for the International Institute for Asian Studies – and this is more rare for institutions and people – a document that marks its initial conception: this is the 'Baby Krishna' report compiled by the Advisory Committee on the 'Small Arts' departments (Kleine Letteren) chaired by J.F. Staal, which appeared in January 1991. The conclusion of the committee, set up in July 1989 by the Minister of Education and Science, contained the recommendation that the possibility be explored of establishing a *European Institute of Asian Studies* "which would organize post-doctoral courses and other meetings, workshops etc. dealing with Asian studies and where fellows who have obtained research support ... could carry out their work and make use of existing library and other support facilities for Asian studies." The committee chaired by Staal was asked to place emphasis on the humanities (especially 'Languages and Cultures') and the social sciences dealing with Asia. As it was felt that the role of the social sciences needed further consideration, a follow-up survey was done by a committee appointed in May 1991 by the Netherlands Royal Academy of Sciences (KNAW). Their report, 'Krishna in the Delta' appeared in October 1991. With a change of name the proposed *European Institute of Asian Studies* became the International Institute for Asian Studies, and the cooperating partners

included, apart from KNAW and Leiden University mentioned in the Baby Krishna report, also Amsterdam University (UvA), and the Free University of Amsterdam (VU).

In the two decades of its existence, and under its three successive directors – Wim Stokhof (1993 to 2005), Max Sparreboom (2006 to 2009) and, since 2010, Philippe Peycam – the IIAS has by and large remained faithful to its original objectives. The aim of improving international co-operation, especially in a European context and between Europe and Asia, has been served, for instance, through fellowship programmes and through the organization of numerous international events, with participants from all over the world. In my personal experience I have been familiar with the IIAS from its very beginnings. I belonged to the first batch of fellows of the IIAS in 1993-1994, and even when I was already appointed as Professor of Sanskrit at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, the IIAS accepted me as a visiting fellow in 2009 during which period I could organize a workshop on Indian traditional medicine: 'Ayurveda in Post-classical and Pre-colonial India' (9 July 2009).

The institutional context of the IIAS has changed considerably since the early 1990s, just as the institutional context of Asian Studies and the 'Small Arts' departments in the Netherlands has changed. The earmarked funds for Asian studies, for instance, were abolished at the beginning of this century. At present, not only the small arts departments, but the Humanities at large have reached precarious conditions, as is clear from a recent report by a committee chaired by J. Cohen, *Sustainable Humanities: Report from the Committee on the National Plan for the Future of the Humanities* (Amsterdam,

2009). Although not focused on Asian studies this report contains much that is also relevant for IIAS, especially its engagement with humanities, next to other sciences. At present IIAS is no longer 'taken care of' by four institutions, but only by Leiden University.

It is impossible to fully review here these changes and their implications for IIAS. The main characteristic and functionality of the IIAS as a unique institute stimulating and cherishing institutional cooperation in the domain of Asian Studies has remained intact from the conception and actual birth of IIAS, till the present time. From this brief overview and from the fact that J.F. Staal was a specialist in Panini's Sanskrit grammar and its structure of rules and metarules, one central part of IIAS' success formula is clear and it gave IIAS a remarkable 'flying start'. From the outset it was placed on a meta-level vis-à-vis all other institutes dealing with or touching on Asia in, first of all, the Netherlands, but also Europe and the world. Although relatively small, IIAS contributed to the facilitation of other institutes more absorbed in specific projects and to the communication, cooperation and interaction between them. Even when IIAS started to engage in its own specific projects, the meta-level activities (manifested, for instance, in its internationally distributed *The Newsletter*) remained an intricate aspect to the functioning of IIAS. It is the level at which the grown up Krishna can derive much of its strength, also in the future, as J.F. Staal's "man-of-steel".

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THIS YEAR WE CELEBRATE the birth of our Institute, 20 years ago. Officially opened on 13 October 1993 by the then State Secretary for Education and Science, Dr M.J. Cohen, the establishment of the International Institute for Asian Studies followed the recommendation by two consecutive committees installed by the Ministry of Education and Royal Netherlands Institute for Arts and Sciences (KNAW). While the first committee was asked to come up with proposals on how to assure and/or improve the quality of research in the so called 'Small Arts' (such as 'Oriental Studies') and the social sciences where they have a function for the 'Small Arts', the instruction for the second committee was to advise on the quality of research in the field of Asian studies in the humanities and social sciences. In their reports both committees stressed the importance of the establishment of an institute for Asian Studies as one of the means to strengthen Asian studies in the Netherlands, and as an important step towards its internationalisation.

The International Institute for Asian Studies – Celebrating 20 Years

Sandra Dehue (IIAS)

The Institute's founding agreement was signed in the summer of 1993 by its four founding partners: the Royal Netherlands Institute for Arts and Sciences (KNAW), the University of Amsterdam (UvA), the Free University of Amsterdam (VU) and Leiden University (LU). Choosing Leiden as its seat, they assigned four goals and activities to the Institute:

1. To set up and execute a post-doctorate programme for Dutch and foreign researchers.
2. The organisation of international scientific gatherings.
3. To act as a national centre for Asian studies to improve international co-operation in the European context.
4. To develop other activities in the field of Asian studies such as the publication of a newsletter.

From its inception, IIAS has committed itself to the fulfilment of these objectives, making the Institute what it is today: a research institute and exchange platform, hosted at Leiden University in the Netherlands, that encourages the multi-disciplinary and comparative study of Asia, and actively promotes (inter)national co-operation. Today, IIAS acts as a national, European and global mediator, bringing together academic and non-academic partners including cultural, social and policy organisations. The Institute operates a fellowship programme (see pages 8-9) and supports high quality joint research projects on topics of common interest to Europe

and Asia in close cooperation with national and international partners (see pages 11-18). The IIAS and ICAS publication series are part of our policy to strengthen Asian studies scholarship. Throughout the year IIAS (co-)organises all types of gatherings such as international conferences and seminars, enabling researchers and fellows to discuss work-in-progress and share findings. IIAS furthermore organises and participates in thematic roundtables which act as think-tanks and provide opportunities for free discussion between a diversity of expert scholars and practitioners. In addition IIAS instigates various outreach activities in order to promote greater public understanding of contemporary Asia (see page 22). As a clearinghouse of information and knowledge, IIAS offers a range of communication instruments enabling it to reach out to thousands of academics and professionals worldwide. IIAS has been running its 'Newsletter' right from the start, with the first issue of the 'IIAS Newsletter' (now simply 'The Newsletter') appearing in August 1993 (see page 6). The IIAS website is the institute's core information repository and goes hand in hand with the monthly IIAS Update and other email notifications keeping subscribers informed.

Since 2010, IIAS has organised most of its research and other activities around the three thematic clusters of Asian Cities, Asian Heritages and Global Asia. The purpose of this approach is not to exclude anything or anyone, but to cultivate synergy and coherence between people and projects.