

IIAS Reports *continued*

Re-examining the 'Subaltern'

Workshop in Mumbai, 10-11 December 2014

Paul Rabé



Above: Scene from the public program. Photo Paul Rabé.

ON 10-11 DECEMBER 2014, the Studio-X space of the Columbia University Global Center in the Fort area of Mumbai was the setting for a workshop entitled *Urban Democracy: Informality, Precarity and Modes of Survival*. This was the second in a series of discussions in the Idea of the City in Asian Contexts series, the urban studies oriented forum of the Rethinking Asian Studies in a Global Context programme, coordinated by IIAS with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (www.rethinking.asia). The first workshop in the series, *Public City, Private City*, was held in New York in August 2014 and explored the politics of planning.

As in New York, the Mumbai workshop brought together a diverse group of around 25 scholars, activists, writers, architects, urban planners, journalists and PhD candidates – this time from around India, other parts of Asia, the U.S. and Europe. The objective in Mumbai was to critically re-examine theories and policies relating to the subaltern city, i.e., the practices of survival, persistence and illegitimized existence found in the so-called 'slums' and 'ghettos' of colonial and late capitalist modernity, in order to find new ways of looking at these phenomena.

The co-conveners, Anupama Rao (Associate Professor in the Department of History at Barnard College, Columbia University) and Paul Rabé (Coordinator of the Urban Knowledge Network Asia at IIAS), were interested in how

historical legacies of planning, spatial segregation and informality in Asian cities and beyond have enabled practices of urban life that challenge the aesthetics of modernism and the logic of private property. 'Slums' and 'ghettos' have been a refuge for disposable populations, including internally displaced persons, refugees, illegal immigrants – as well as the poor. But they are also sites of improvised and tenuous forms of sociality and social cooperation, political actions and claims – arguably forms of informal 'democracy' – which either go unrecognized or become stigmatized as violence, crime, or unproductive and fruitless 'mob' behavior. Encroachment, illegality, and the resort to informal livelihoods are sites of subaltern survival, and define struggles for recognition in the face of spatial exclusion and civic disenfranchisement.

Discussions in the Studio-X space centered on four session topics relating to various aspects of the subaltern city:

1. 'Between the formal and the informal', touching on regulations, policy and planning, land grabs and urban dispossession.
2. 'Conceiving and intervening in the slum', covering approaches to the 'slum' by governments, donor agencies, civil society and market players; notions of power and identity; and collective action versus individual market opportunism.
3. 'Segregation and ghettoization', examining how categories of social difference such as migrants, caste, religion and gender are used to produce social and spatial separation.
4. 'Housing and right to the city struggles', touching on cultural and activist interventions on behalf of precarious and un-housed populations, emerging sites of 'infrapolitics', and experiments in utilizing public-private partnerships for spatial justice.

The workshop ended with a reception and a public programme moderated by Jared Stark (Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Eckerd College) and featuring artistic interventions by literary theorist Emily Sun from National Tsing Hua University (Taiwan), Mumbai-based documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan and writer and cultural critic Jerry Pinto.

The third and last of the urban workshops to be convened by Paul Rabé and Anupama Rao in the context of the *Rethinking Asian Studies* programme will take place in Shanghai in October 2015 on the theme of the 'Future of Urban Studies'. The co-conveners will close the workshop series with a presentation of the discussion themes from all three workshops.

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University of Amsterdam hosts the 4th edition of the Sri Lanka Roundtable

Joeri Scholtens (UvA) & Maarten Bavinck (UvA)

ON 11-12 DECEMBER 2014, the Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research (AISSR) hosted the fourth edition of the 'Sri Lanka Roundtable', gathering scholars from all corners of Europe and abroad. Following the tradition set by Utrecht University (2009), Zurich University (2011) and London School of Economics (2013), it brought together a wide range of social science scholarship on the history, social and economic organisation, and the culture of the country formerly known as Ceylon. The next Sri Lanka Roundtable is planned at the University of Edinburgh, early 2016.

With 55 participants from Europe, Sri Lanka and the US, the roundtable proved an excellent opportunity to provide an overview of social science research on contemporary Sri Lanka, as presented by a mix of graduate students and senior researchers. With the civil war coming to an end five years ago, much attention was devoted to understanding and defining the nature of 'post-war' Sri Lanka and the troubled post-war reconstruction process. Other themes included the rise of Buddhist extremism, caste and kinship, fisheries livelihoods, the executive presidency and the position of civil society in contemporary Sri Lanka.

The opportunity was also used to launch two new fascinating books on Sri Lanka. The first book, *Checkpoint, Temple, Church and Mosque, A Collaborative Ethnography of War and Peace*, is co-authored by Jonathan Spencer, Jonathan Goodhand, Shahul Hasbullah, Bart Klem, Benedikt Korf and Kalinga Tudor Silva. The book consists of rich ethnographies in eastern Sri Lanka during the last phase of the war and provokes new debate about the role of religious organisations and leaders in situations of extreme conflict. The second book, *Of Tamils and Tigers: a journey through Sri Lanka's war years, part II*, is based on the diaries of the Dutch Missionary Ben Bavinck (1924-2012), who spent a major part of his life in the war zone. A historical record of our times, Ben Bavinck's diaries "record with humor and compassion the defiance and spirit in many of the ordinary people who stood up to the Tigers and the State." The book was edited by Maithreyi Rajeshkumar of the Rajini Thiranaagama Foundation. Part I, which covered the years 1989 to 1994, was published in 2011. Part II deals with the period 1994 to 2004.

The Sri Lanka roundtable was hosted by the Governance and Inclusive Development (GID) programme group at the University of Amsterdam. The University of Zurich, the CERES research school, the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) and the REINCORPFISH research project provided additional support.

A multi-disciplinary approach to analyzing climate change in Yangon

Report of training course given in Yangon, 3-14 November 2014

Paul Rabé

FROM 3-14 NOVEMBER 2014, a team with members from IIAS, the UNESCO-IHE Institute for Water Education (Delft, the Netherlands), and the Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC), jointly organized a tailor-made training course in Yangon to better understand the consequences of climate change (particularly flooding) for planning and the built environment in Yangon, Myanmar. The course was supported by a grant from the Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation in Higher Education (NUFFIC).

The training course was designed for planning officials from YCDC, the municipal government of Yangon. Half of the 26 course participants were from YCDC itself; the other half were from the YCDC's development partners, including the Department for Human Settlements and Housing, the Department of Public Works, the Yangon Heritage Trust, and the Yangon Technical University. The international lecturers included Paul Rabé, Coordinator at IIAS of the *Urban Knowledge Network Asia* (UKNA), Cornelis Dijkgraaf from *Assistance in Management* in the Netherlands, Kittima Leeruttanawisut from *Assistance in Management* in Thailand, Professor Chris Zevenbergen of the *Flood Resilience Group* at UNESCO-IHE, and Budhi Setiawan of BAPPENAS in Indonesia. On the YCDC side, the course was coordinated by Dr Toe Aung, Director of the Urban Planning Division.



Above: Course participants pose for a group photo in Dala Township. Photograph: Paul Rabé

The centrepiece of the course was a 'quick scan' exercise, which helped participants to identify, rate, and protect critical infrastructure assets that may be at risk from flooding. These include both economic infrastructure, for example roads, power stations and markets, as well as social infrastructure, including schools, hospitals and heritage buildings – such as pagodas and historic shop houses.

The course provided an opportunity for some hands-on learning. The participants divided up into three groups, each of which focused on a different township in Yangon with distinct flooding challenges. In each township the course participants canvassed the area and met residents and other stakeholders in their efforts to compile information as a basis for their final output in the course: a flood risk analysis plan for the township. The three townships were as follows:

1. Latha Township is a small but highly densely populated inner city historical district, situated beside the Yangon River and thus at risk of flooding when the river exceeds its banks. Critical infrastructure here includes highways, part of the port, a major city hospital, historical buildings, houses, shrines and businesses in the Chinatown area.
2. Mingala Taung Nyunt Township is an inner city suburban residential area with a rapidly growing population. Flooding in this area is common because of the township's low-lying location between Kandawgyi Lake and the Yangon and Bago Rivers. Critical infrastructure in this case includes roads, canals, markets, many religious shrines, and large housing estates.
3. Dala Township is a large but low-density area south of the Yangon River that is not yet connected to the city by bridge. As a result, the township maintains a largely agricultural economy. Flooding in this township is pervasive due its low-lying location beside the river. Villagers have largely learned to live with regular flooding, yet new development is vulnerable to flooding. In this township the critical infrastructure includes canals, roads, power stations, villages and large expanses of agricultural land.

The three groups of participants presented their flood risk analyses and plans at a major ceremony at Yangon City Hall on 14 November 2014. The ceremony was presided over by the Mayor of the Yangon City Development Committee, H.E. U Hla Myint, and was attended by representatives of various municipal departments, national environmental agencies, and academic institutions. One of the remarkable legacies of the tailor-made course is that it demonstrated the importance of a multi-disciplinary perspective in analyzing the causes and impacts of flooding and climate change, including the natural sciences, engineering, the social sciences, as well as the humanities. Thus, the history and ways of life of riverside communities in the three townships featured as prominently in the final flood risk plans of the participants as the analysis of tidal patterns of the Yangon River and the feasibility of engineering solutions and awareness-raising programs for the townships.