

## Special Issue

### Editorial

## The Evolution of Geography-based South Asia Studies

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Geography as a scientific discipline in Germany forms a longstanding tradition in research on South Asia. Traditionally the focus of German geographers was on landscapes, understood as entities consisting of natural (for example surface structures, soils, and vegetation) and anthropogenic (such as settlements and cultivated areas) elements. These different elements were analyzed within large-scale contexts such as climatic or cultural zones. Publications about South Asia written before the 1960s aimed at describing this identified entity, as well as the “personality” of the subcontinent (see, for example, Krebs 1939; Steche 1952).

With the increase of knowledge about the complexity of the processes shaping the Earth, geographers turned away from being generalists toward being specialists. Within the discipline, the divide between human geography and physical geography started to increase since the 1940ies. Based on these two columns of the discipline new subdisciplines began to develop: among others, Development Geography, Economic Geography, Urban Geography, Climatology, Geomorphology and Soil Geography. The change in the research interests of geographers is inter alia documented by the growing number of commissions of the International Geographical Union.

This change also influenced the kind of publications that German geographers produced about South Asia from the 1960s onward. Already in 1953 Gutersohn published *Indien* as a general overview of the young nation, but clearly focusing therein on human geography aspects with only a compact physical geography introduction — indicating a specialization in geographical thinking. The 1960s, then, finally mark the turning point toward specialization: In 1965 Büdel published a book on the geomorphology of the Indian Deccan, while in the same decade Bronger started to work on human geography aspects of India — which he has continued to do ever since. Bronger published on the connection between the caste system and agricultural structures (1970a, 1970b) and on development planning (1976). Since the

1980s geographical studies have become more theory-oriented. Examples for this turn are Bohle's (1981) publication on irrigation and society in the Cauvery Delta, which contributed to the discussion on development theories, or Brückner's (1989) publication on the coastal geomorphology of India, which added to our understanding of related processes in tropical coastal zones.

The different subdisciplines within Geography have recently cultivated relations with specific neighboring disciplines regarding academic exchange on theories and the discussion of developing trends. While soil geographers, for example, need for their work a comprehensive understanding of chemical processes, social geographers meanwhile relate with sociologists and draw back, for example, on Bourdieu's theories for understanding social processes and structures (see, for example, Sakdapolrak 2010). In spite of this specialization, geographers still relate their research to larger (local, regional, global) contexts and processes. The distinct approach of Geography is, therefore, the contextualization of specific research within larger spatial and temporal scales. The past generalist slant of Geography is thus still present in today's research practices, and consequently geographical research usually has a twin grounding: a theoretical embedding within a specific subdiscipline and a regional embedding that relates the research to the local context. As such the specialty groups of the German Geographical Society usually have either a regional or a thematic focus, and many scholars are members of several different such groups simultaneously.

This special issue is a collection of eight papers written by various members of the South Asia specialty group of the German Geographical Society (Arbeitskreis Südasiens in der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Geographie, [www.geographien-suedasiens.de](http://www.geographien-suedasiens.de)). The range of topics addressed by the authors of this issue reflects the variety within Geography as an academic subject. In this collection of papers, the scholars analyze current developments in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan against the backdrop of processes of global change.

The first paper by Tine Trumpp and Frauke Kraas describes the governance of urban heritage in Delhi, India. It addresses the challenges related to keeping a place-based identity in a megacity, wherein the contradictory forces of globalization result in rapid change. Urban changes often unfold faster than do the abilities to develop an adequate framework for the governing of them. Also related to urbanization is the fourth paper here, by Carsten Butsch, Mareike Kroll, Frauke Kraas, and Erach Bharucha. They together analyze the state of urban health in the emerging megacity of Pune, India, specifically by studying the changing burden of disease and the factors influencing access to healthcare services — being influenced both by significant aspects of global change such as evolving lifestyle patterns and by developing frameworks for the Indian healthcare system. Alexandra Eisenberger's and Markus Keck's paper — the fifth of this special issue — is based on the concept of the entrepreneurial city, which stems from Critical Geography. It addresses the increasing

economic competition between cities, forcing them to become entrepreneurs competing with each other globally over capital, citizens, and ideas. In their paper the authors show how localized elites successfully block the shifting of a traditional marketplace in Dhaka, Bangladesh, as demanded by globalized elites.

Links between families and friends in the rural hinterland and the number of internal migrants appearing in Dhaka have become more intense with the advent of another phenomenon that is closely associated with globalization — the spread of mobile communication devices. Harald Sterly describes in his paper — which constitutes the second paper in this special issue — which practices of interaction have been established and how translocal networks in Bangladesh have changed in recent years. Migrants to Dhaka are also relevant in Gregor C. Falk's study of the Ganges-Brahmaputra Delta in Bangladesh — the collection's third paper. He analyzes the various changes in the socioeconomic system of this delta, and demonstrates how they are linked far more to the country's increasing involvement in global markets than to the often mentioned climate change. Falk demonstrates how socioeconomic changes in this delta region *inter alia* stimulate migration from there to Bangladesh's capital.

Julia Poerting's paper — which constitutes the seventh paper in this special issue — looks at a different facet of globalization, namely the effects of increasing standardization of commodities. Taking the example of farmers from different regions in Pakistan, she illustrates how new practices of agriculture arise in the Global South. These changes in farming are judged ambivalently, since on the one hand production patterns are shifted to suit global markets — happening with and despite several associated risks — while on the other they open up ways out of Pakistan's agrarian crisis. Global standards of a different kind are discussed by Stephanie Leder and Erach Bharucha in their paper — the eighth of this collection — on changing educational landscapes in India. They describe how principles developed for the UNESCO Decade on Education for Sustainable Development have trickled down to curricula in Indian schools.

The sixth paper, by Thomas Hennig, applies a different scale of analysis in its case studies. He explores energy production on a regional level in India's Northeast and links developments there to geopolitical processes within the Southeast Asia region. Additionally he describes global influences on the development of India's power-generating infrastructure through the Clean Development Mechanisms developed as part of the Kyoto Protocol.

From the short description of these papers it is obvious that Geography as a discipline has — as have the topics, theories, and methods applied in it — changed fundamentally in recent decades. Together these papers provide a snapshot of the current research being undertaken by German geographers in and on South Asia. This collection also reflects that there is, unfortunately, at present a predominance of human geographers working on South Asian topics. It is portrayed as a region that is

currently experiencing fundamental transformation processes related to the forces of globalization, namely urbanization, the alteration of landscapes, climate change, societal shifts, changes in human health and evolving conditions regarding human security.

The South Asia specialty group is a platform through which geographers from different subdisciplines and scholars from adjacent academic disciplines can exchange their respective experiences of all these developments. The group emerged from an initial workshop held in Cologne, in 2011. Soon the participants agreed to institutionalize these meetings and expand their means of collaboration. Beside annual meetings (usually on the fourth weekend in January), the study group also started its own publication series (*Geographien Südasiens*, available through the online library of the Südasieninstitut Heidelberg), awards an annual prize for the best bachelor/masters thesis on South Asia, and seeks to jointly publish research. For example the theme of the first issue of *Geographische Rundschau*, published in January 2015, was India, exclusively consisting of contributions made by members of this specialty group.

We would like to conclude our editorial by offering a cordial open invitation to all members of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Asienkunde and all scholars who have a regional focus in South Asia to participate in our meetings in future. We are more than happy to open up our meetings and activities for interdisciplinary discussions and cooperation, and look forward to further fruitful collaboration.

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