

Revisiting South Asia

Convener: Dr. Sumeet Mhaskar

Hosted by the Research Group “Modern Indian History” at the
Centre for Modern Indian Studies, Göttingen University

3rd December 2024
Heyne-Haus, Papendiek 14, 37073 Göttingen

9.30am to 9.50am

Welcome

Dr. Karin Klenke, Co-ordinator, Centre for Modern Indian Studies, University of Göttingen

Opening Remarks

Prof. Dr. Ravi Ahuja, Professor of Modern Indian History, Centre for Modern Indian Studies,
University of Göttingen

9.50 am to 11.10 am: Caste, Labour and Transformations

*Tamil Diaspora, Cultural Expressions, and the Question of Caste: The Coolie Heritage in
Tamil Cinema.*

Dr. Dickens Leonard, Assistant Professor, IIT Delhi.

Caste, Occupations, and (Im)mobility in Modern Indian Industry, 1870–2006.

Dr. Sumeet Mhaskar, Professor, O. P. Jindal Global University

11.10-11.20: Coffee Break

11.20- 12.40: Social History and Contestations

*When Kunbis Became Marathas - Tracing the Kunbi-Maratha Faultline in Mid-Twentieth
Century Western India.*

Dr. Prabodhan Pol, Assistant Professor at the Manipal Centre for Humanities- Manipal
Academy of Higher Education.

*To Please or to Displease? Contested Histories and Contemporary Expositions of Kodungallur
Bharani Festival.*

Dr. Manju Edachira, Madeleine Haas Russell Postdoctoral Fellow in Critical Caste Studies and
Lecturer in South Asian Studies at Brandeis University.

12.40-13.30 Lunch Break

13.30 to 14.50: Caste, Law and Society

Constitution, Caste, & Limits of the Law: Buddhist-Navayana Underpinnings of the Constitution of India.

Dr. Ashna Singh, Assistant Professor, National Law University, Bangalore.

Reimagining Innovation Paradigms: Electric Rickshaws in India and the Potential of Bottom-Up Approaches in Sustainable Mobility.

Vikas Bagde, PHD Researcher, University of Amsterdam.

14.50 to 15.20 - Concluding Remarks on “Revisiting South Asia”

Abstracts

Tamil Diaspora, Cultural Expressions, and the Question of Caste: The Coolie Heritage in Tamil Cinema.

Dr. Dickens Leonard, Assistant Professor, IIT Delhi

This paper would highlight the dynamics of a cultural text amongst Tamils in a contemporary diaspora film made by Pa. Ranjith, the iconic Tamil filmmaker. *Kabali* (2016) is set in Malaysia amongst the Tamil indentured labourers; it foregrounds the contemporary question of caste amongst them. The film, in this paper, would be treated as an indexical text; read along and evaluated against two trajectories of recent scholarship on Tamil diaspora: a) the indentured labour and the coolie migration to Singapore and Malaysia for work in plantations as a “subaltern history” of Tamils (Solomon, 2016); and b) the reception and circulation of Tamil diasporic culture and “the question of caste” in cinema as evaluated by contemporary scholars from Singapore and Penang (Velayutham and Devadas, 2021). I propose that a distinct story emerges in these crossovers as we read a contemporary cultural text against its heritage: say cinema and caste (Abraham & Misrahi-Barak, 2022).

The indentured migrations eastward to Singapore, Malaysia, Malaya, Ceylon, and Burma across the Bay of Bengal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—as coolies—are interwoven into an earlier history of a colonial sea-trade. The representation of caste as a spectacle of space in the filmic text *Kabali* would be analyzed against such a heritage amongst Tamils. I suggest that the film re-inscribes, if not “exscribes” the force of caste, by working against its spectral presence in indentured spaces such as Malaysia. I propose to analyse and conceptualise four such re-constitutions in the history of these crossings—as coolie heritage—that get captured in a film such as *Kabali*: A. Criminal Space; B. Surveillance (Kangani) Space; C. Sacral Space; D. Reformatory Space. By arguing thus, I would like to problematize the claim whether Dalits are situated in a disjointed space within a caste society even in migration—that is, how do castes acquire valuation when spread across—in diaspora—through a monumental exclusion of the outcaste?

Dickens Leonard is presently Assistant Professor of Literature in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi (IITD). He researched the writings of the nineteenth century Tamil intellectual Iyothee Thass on Tamil Buddhism for his PhD (2017). Interested in comparative studies and cultural theory, he regularly publishes on anti-caste thought and Tamil cinema in scholarly journals and edited volumes.

Caste, Occupations, and (Im)mobility in Modern Indian Industry, 1870–2006.
Dr. Sumeet Mhaskar, O. P. Jindal Global University

The role of caste in urban industrial settings has long been a subject of intense debate. The initial Marxists and modernisation scholarship expected caste to weaken (or become irrelevant) due to the rapid expansion of large-scale manufacturing industries and the accompanying urbanisation process. According to the caste norms, occupational flexibility and mobility decreased as one moved down the caste ladder – with practically no economic rights for the untouchables. Under industrial capitalism, scholars expected that individual skills would be prioritised rather than the caste, religion, and gender background of the migrant. However, such claims were rarely tested with large-scale empirical evidence. Moreover, as the post-colonial Indian state and academic scholarship dominated by the upper castes discontinued the documentation of information on caste, it created a massive empirical gap in analysing the role of caste under industrial capitalism. Against this backdrop, the paper makes a unique contribution by examining the role of caste in shaping occupational choices in Mumbai’s textile industry from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century. It demonstrates that caste-based notions of occupational (in)flexibility and (im)mobility influenced occupational choices in modern manufacturing industries. In varying proportions, the socially superior castes, the dominant castes, and the Other Backward Castes moved between the least desirable to the most prestigious jobs. On the other hand, untouchables were actively prohibited from entering the most prestigious jobs, restricting the majority of them to work in the least desirable occupations. The paper also shows that caste-based restrictions were challenged in urban industrial contexts, generating long-lasting social and political churnings.

Dr. Sumeet Mhaskar is a Professor of Sociology at the Jindal School of Government and Public Policy, O. P. Jindal Global University. Prof. Mhaskar's research comprehensively explores the multifaceted vulnerabilities workers face at the lower end of India’s burgeoning economy. He is finalising his book manuscript on Mumbai’s mill workers and their responses to joblessness resulting from large-scale industrial closures. His scholarly contributions have been featured in peer-reviewed journals, edited books, magazines, policy reports, and working papers. Additionally, he shares his insights through opinion pieces newspapers and online portals.

When Kunbis Became Marathas - Tracing the Kunbi-Maratha Faultline in Mid-Twentieth Century Western India.

Dr. Prabodhan Pol, Manipal Academy of Higher Education

The Maratha reservation issue has recently emerged as a politically significant question in Maharashtra. The growing demand from the Maratha community for reservation has led to considerable unrest in the state. As a demographically dominant and politically influential social group, the anger of the Marathas cannot simply be overlooked or dismissed. From a broader perspective, the Maratha agitations also highlight the ongoing crisis among dominant peasant castes (including Patels and Jats) that has unfolded primarily in the post-1990s context. Drawing insights from historical scholarship, this paper examines the nature of Maratha caste consciousness, which became pronounced during the late colonial period. While it does not extensively explore how Kunbis transitioned to becoming Marathas in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it focuses on how the new Maratha identity of the early 20th century was constructed within a unique political framework. This process involved reconceptualizing social and cultural idioms of caste consciousness. As a result, the Marathas explicitly distanced themselves from their earlier association with the Kunbi identity, adopting a new Kshatriya identity and customs that aligned them with a distinct political and ideological stance. The Kshatriyization of the Marathas had a significant impact on the trajectory of non-Brahmin radicalism in Western India, reducing its scope to tokenistic political usage. In essence, this paper does not focus on how the Marathas became Kunbis but rather examines what happened to the Kunbis when they transformed into Marathas.

Dr Prabodhan Pol is an Assistant Professor at the Manipal Centre for Humanities- Manipal Academy of Higher Education. His interests lie in the Social History of the 20th Century India, histories of vernacular journalism, and caste politics and modern Maharashtra. He is a regular commentator in major national newspapers, periodicals and academic journals.

To Please or to Displease? Contested Histories and Contemporary Expositions of Kodungallur *Bharani* Festival.

Dr. Manju Edachira, Brandeis University

This paper studies Kodungallur *Bharani* (currently a temple festival in Kerala known for its subversive nature), its contested history, and the contemporary manifestations foregrounding spatial, linguistic, and experiential realms of the festival. Firstly, I examine the contested narratives and the historical accounts of the festival. Secondly, I examine how the spatiality of *Bharani* (Kodungallur/*kavu*) creates certain intimacies while tampering with the other. Thirdly, I analyse the language of *Bharani* and its politics through which the caste oppressed communities are placed outside the time and space of the dominant. Lastly, I discuss *Bharani* as an embodied experience of the devotees who straddle between the oppressive caste society and the egalitarian civilizational claims, devotion and defiance, rejection and revival. Through a historical as well as a contemporary ethnographic study, I examine the changing nature of the festival and the attempts to recover an emancipatory

Buddhist past, particularly from the site and sight of *Keezhkavu*, an oppressed caste place of worship near Kodungallur temple.

Dr. Manju Edachira, Madeleine Haas Russell Postdoctoral Fellow in Critical Caste Studies and Lecturer in South Asian Studies at Brandeis University.

Constitution, Caste, & Limits of the Law: Buddhist-Navayana Underpinnings of the Constitution of India.

Dr. Ashna Singh, Assistant Professor, National Law University, Bangalore

Dr. Ambedkar is often accused of infusing the Indian Constitution with foreign, western, and alien ideals in the garb of modernity. The Constitution of India is also criticised today by majoritarian Hindu conservatives & liberals alike for being non-Indian in nature and for not taking into account ancient shastras and dharmic ideals. During the Constituent Assembly debates, many members also proposed a theological basis for the Constitution of India, for instance, by invoking the idea of ‘God’ in the Preamble. Further, during various Constituent Assembly debates, when amendments to various articles were being discussed, Dr Ambedkar turned down seemingly benign amendments such as those to now Article 51 of the Constitution. In my hypothesis, he did so to ensure that both Gandhian & ancient-shastric contexts were consciously kept away from the Indian Constitution as both these ideals had the potential to undermine the true transformative potential of the Constitution that Dr. Ambedkar had in mind.

The transformation Dr. Ambedkar sought in society via a legal document was primarily the upliftment of the oppressed. In the Hindu social order, the worst form of oppression was enforced by the law of caste. In my hypothesis, Dr. Ambedkar not only kept the ideas of these two factions away from the Constitution, but he instead infused the Constitution with various Buddhistic-Navayanistic ideals instead and thus gave us a Constitution that tackled both internal and external forms of colonialism by being both indigenous and emancipatory in nature. Thus, Dr. Ambedkar was not just blindly borrowing western ideals in the making of the Constitution, nor was he merely borrowing from outside and tweaking western ideals to make them adaptable to the Indian context, rather he was actively infusing various Buddhist ideals throughout the process.

Dr. Ambedkar has also theorised how the Hindu religion is not a religion at all but is a law and a lawless and immoral law at that. He further explains that laws are subject to change and thus the Hindu social law must be changed. In my hypothesis, to understand the full potential of Dr Ambedkar’s Constitution to address caste, it is also necessary to understand his theorisation that the caste system is the law of the land before modern legal interventions in the Hindu social order. Lastly, it becomes crucial to understand the underlying Buddhist subtext of the Indian Constitution because a purely plain legalistic reading of Constitutional provisions that tackle caste is incomplete and superficial. This is because even if there is legal equality and legal redressal of wrongs and there is no corresponding transformation in the society’s morality, the overall Constitutional project of inculcating social democracy will remain unfinished.

Reimagining Innovation Paradigms: Electric Rickshaws in India and the Potential of Bottom-Up Approaches in Sustainable Mobility.

Vikas Bagde, PhD Researcher, University of Amsterdam

Based on a case study on electric rickshaws in India, this paper makes a case against the prevailing innovation paradigm, known for its arrogant, top-down, technocentric approach that has led to environmental degradation. The study advocates for a paradigm shift towards bottom-up innovation (BUI), driven by intrinsic motivation within users & communities. Through primary data analysis, my research reveals how BUI enables the utilization of local resources, minimal reliance on intricate supply chains. The minimalistic and frugal approach of BUI practitioners fosters optimal use of locally available knowledge and material resources, thus rendering practices inherently sustainable. These findings highlight BUI's adaptability to hyperlocal conditions, offering tailored solutions to entrenched social challenges. Moreover, this research investigates the role of narratives in the innovation and diffusion processes of bottom-up mobility innovations. It stresses the significance of user-driven innovation and emphasizes the necessity for continuous, incremental improvements. By expanding the discourse on sustainable mobility systems, this study underscores the transformative potential of bottom-up innovations in reshaping the prevailing mobility paradigm. Overall, this research contributes to a comprehensive understanding of innovation's contextual applications, particularly in fostering sustainable mobility solutions. For this conference I would like to discuss my working chapter and collect your feedback as well. During the conference I will be sharing the printed copies, and collect it back right after presentation.

Vikas Bagde is currently a PHD Researcher at the University of Amsterdam, where he has been engaged since January 2022. His research focuses on the current challenges in mobility innovation, aiming to identify and explore potential solutions. Specifically, he is intrigued by the recent emergence of Electric Rickshaws (ER) in India, viewing it as a compelling case of bottom-up and frugal innovation. Bagde's work seeks to contribute to understanding and addressing issues in the development and diffusion of mobility innovations.