Asian borderlands: connections, corridors and communities

Eric de Maaker


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 (CSAS) at the National University of Singapore, and organised with the active support of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS). The workshop report of ‘Harnessing counter-culture to construct identity: mapping Dalit cultural heritage in contemporary India’

Ronki Ram

Leiden University, the Netherlands, 7-8 December, 2012

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

The Workshop, organized by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) and Leiden University for Area Studies (UAS) in Leiden, focused on the emergence of Dalit cultural heritage as a counter-culture to the mainstream culture of India. The conference was jointly hosted by the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden, the Netherlands, 7-8 December, 2012, and organized with the active support of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS).

The Dalit movement adopts various strategies in its trade 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 that of 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 obscure 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-accelerating present cast in the images of yesterday. It is in this critical context that tradition and modernity have been acquiring new meanings and nuances, individually and jointly. 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 Chamars, Pathans and Adi-Hindus) presented a counter to the mainstream historical narrative and symbolically traced 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 Narayanan’s presentation (Crossing borders: Bhogat folk ballad tradition of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and Nepal) argued 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 Hardtman’s paper (Dalit women in poetry: art and in the Global) 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 represented and marginalized by both men in the Dalit movement and by the Indian feminist movement.

Prof. Rajeev Lochan’s paper (Finding a voice, instituting memories – rhetoric and ideas in creating and sustaining ‘Bahujan-Mulayam’) dealt with the critical theme of creating a shared memory of repression and suppression through the agency of the non-political All India Dalit Bahujan (SIDB) and Minority Communities Employees Federation (MAMECF).

The panels included in the conference engaged with these topics from a variety of theoretical angles and disciplinary perspectives. Panels explored themes such as ‘migration and mobility’, ‘identity, ideas, 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 2008. 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 to host conferences that 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 professed from the involvement 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 engaging 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 editions of the Borderlands Conference were held in Gwalior, 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.


Tina Harris (Sociology and Anthropology department, University of Amsterdam) and Arjan Krikke (Institute for Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University).

Notes

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