

**SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES OVERSEAS:
AT THE CROSSROADS OF SOUTH ASIA-MINDEDNESS
IN BRITAIN, AUSTRALIA, AND NEW ZEALAND**

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It is particularly apposite to review the state of South Asian studies in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand for the crossroads of their development and provision have clearly been reached. In the late 1960s, when I first became "South Asia-minded," South Asian studies were flourishing and clearly mainstream. Everywhere one looked there was expansion and funding with research activity and publishing output to match. In Britain, schools of postgraduates had gathered round A. L. Basham and Kenneth Ballhatchet at SOAS¹ and C.C. Davies and J. Gallagher at Oxford; another school was starting to gather round Eric Stokes and Anil Seal at Cambridge. At Canberra, Anthony Low had turned the Australian National University into a world class centre for the study of modern India, and A.L. Basham² was about to turn it into a world class centre for the study of ancient India as well. New Zealand boasted an enclave of expertise on Sikhism which centred on Hew McLeod at Dunedin. Most their products soon scattered to universities around the world either going straight to "chairs" or soon to be elevated to them. It was something of a migratory merry-go-round. To New Delhi from London went Romila Thapar; R.J. Moore started at SOAS before heading for Canberra and eventually Adelaide; Peter Reeves did the round trip leaving Perth for Sussex before returning to Perth. Ravinder Kumar became Director of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library via Canberra and Sydney. And so on and so forth. These were heady and exciting times.

By the 1980s, however, it was a somewhat different story. While still

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¹ School of African and Oriental Studies, first established as School of Oriental Studies in 1916 before acquiring its current name in 1938.

² A.L. Basham took up the Chair of Asian Civilizations at the ANU in 1968, a position he held to his retirement in 1990.

mainstream, South Asian studies in Britain, Australia and New Zealand had come face to face with the prospect of eventual marginalization. The academic leadership was still there, some of it new and different, but much of it was simply older. That was the trouble. The unbridled confidence and certainty of youthful vigor was giving way to the pessimism and dimming vision of old age. In whatever discipline, the profession was getting older and it was not being renewed. Hardest hit, Australia experienced a decade of contraction, over 28 positions in South Asian studies being lost through retirements alone, and an attrition rate which threatened the disappearance of South Asia as an area of study altogether. It has virtually disappeared from the Australian National University where once it flourished, and has had to fall back upon former, though not yet as prominent, outreaches at Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and Armidale. SOAS too fell on hard times and is no longer as crowded or quite as central as it was.

A concerted reaction in all three countries beckons South Asianists in the 1990s. There have been some gains already. Over ten new appointments in a range of fields have been made in Britain over the last two years. Australia has scored none, but it can point to the establishment of the Australia-India Council in 1992 and a National Centre for South Asian Studies in 1993 as encouraging achievements. The brief for both institutions, which receive government backing, is to make Australians more South Asia-"literate." With much the same emphasis applying across the Tasman, New Zealand has even managed some "quiet" growth (Catanach 1943: 137-8). But the outcome is by no means certain. South Asian studies could just as easily flounder as flourish. Clearly Australia with its much thinner, "aging" base cannot afford to wait too long for change, and New Zealand's base has always been vulnerably small to start with.

Such then in outline is the composite picture and fluctuating pattern of South Asian studies in Britain, Australia and New Zealand that I intend to look at in more detail. Not that I can review the entire landscape. It is too broad, too diverse, and too cluttered. But I can and will look at some of its salient features as I perceive them, the general contours of the setting, the history of growth, the changing nature of the intellectual input, the underpinning variables of future development. The task involved is a four-fold one. In order to establish where the study of South Asia is heading in the three countries concerned, it is incumbent to know from which direction it has come, what ground has been covered, and why the journey was undertaken in the first place. These issues will be

addressed separately in their appropriate contexts: motivational, historical, intellectual, and destinational.

Orientalism and All That

Why have "non-Asian" nations such as Britain, Australia and New Zealand bothered to study South Asia? For extremely formidable boundaries of language, geography, culture and time have to be crossed in order to establish, let alone transmit, any understanding of the sub-continent. These constitute a problematic divide for even the disinterested pursuit of knowledge. It has certainly not been because any of the countries comprising South Asia – India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal – have seriously commended themselves as integral and significant parts of Asia's rise to economic and global prominence – the avenue of access, perhaps. If anything, the reverse is true.

Indeed, South Asia tends to be seen as not only peripheral to "this" Asia – the Asia of the rampant economic "tigers" of the North and East – but also firmly part of the old "third world." As such it persists in the popular mine, at least, as one of the poorest, most densely populated and impenetrable frontiers, economically backward, socially divided, religiously volatile and commercially unattractive, very much a "dark" and forbidding sub-continent. As the *Economist* was recently inclined to put it, even India continues to present as a "sleeping elephant," ponderous and undynamic, "one of the most mismanaged and inward-looking economies in the world."³ protected by a curtain of red tape. Even if now poised to "come in from the cold" and join the so-called "open" market system,⁴ it has not been the region's suddenly preceived economic potential that has fuelled its study to date in the "Anglo-Saxon" world. Rather it has been its classical and colonial past.

The reason for such interest given by Edward Said in 1978 is related to the pursuit of power over the cultural as well as the material life of the region. Not only physical, but also intellectual colonization was allegedly involved. In a very testing critique of the structure and content of "Western" studies of the Islamic near east, he argued that scholars, among

³ "Freeing India's Economy: the Elephant Awakes," *Economist*, 23 May 1992, p.21.

⁴ Greg Sheridan, "India comes in from the cold at last," *Australian*, 8 July 1992; "Rupee free at last: India joins the trading world," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 23 July 1992; "India's Economy to open," *Australian*, 9 May 1993; "India takes off," *Economist*, 26 June 1993.

other agencies of the Western state, studied the "Orient" not to illuminate but to imprison it (Said 1978). The knowledge they collectively constructed of societies they did not know, and yet reproduced over and over again, was hegemonizing. It served primarily to shape Europe's sense of identity as an area of superior culture by portraying the "Orient" as an area of inferior culture, waiting to be manipulated and controlled. Over time, what was created was not reality but an imperialist-discourse-*Orientalism*—a cumulative way of misrepresenting the "Other" and acting towards it.

Understandably, Said's case did not convince everyone (Kiernan 1979: 345–51; Owen 1979: 58–63). For not only was it uniformly inculcating, its logic implied that the appropriate remedy was to set aside the knowledge thus far compiled, and start again from scratch. The *Journal of Asian Studies* was unimpressed then and it has continued to reserve its judgment.⁵ But Said convinced Ronald Inden, who in 1986 declared that *Orientalism* had crept into and disfigured "British" studies of South Asia as well, and in much the same way. Inden identified two forms of *Orientalist* construction: one "hegemonic," in which Western scholars had appropriated the power to represent South Asia in its totality; the other "romantic," in which they had portrayed it principally as a land of exotic and spiritual virtue (Inden 1986: 401–46). Thus, South Asia was imagined and imaged as a civil society whose development had been governed by caste and Hinduism, a civilization consequently positioned near the bottom of an hierachical world order.

Of course, when I decided to specialize in Indian Nationalist history in the mid- to late 1960s, I am not sure that I was motivated by so compulsive a concern for power, imperial or intellectual. Admittedly, I had first been introduced to the Indian sub-continent through British history and as a part of it. What schoolboy in Britain and its former white colonies of settlement had not read Kipling, or been alerted to the exploits of Warren Hastings or George Nathaniel Curzon? But this did not obscure the fact that the age of Empire was almost over and had definitely passed in South Asia, the era of progressive decolonization, which replaced it, was very much in the ascendance.

What had captured my attention at university was not the saga of the British raj, but its ostensible solvent, Gandhian *satyagraha* – the unique

⁵ See "Review Symposium: Edward Said's *Orientalism*," *Journal of Asian Studies* 39(3): 481–517; and "Forum on Universalism and Relativism in Asian Studies," *Journal of Asian Studies* 50(1). If the bogey was now "universalism," rather than *Orientalism*, the nature of the problem was similar.

movement of non-violent conflict resolution. Seeking to unlock the determinants of Indian freedom rather than the mechanisms of Indian subjugation, I secured a British Council scholarship to do a Ph.D. at Edinburgh University under Professor V.G. Kiernan. As alternatives, I had also contemplated Dr. Anil Seal at Cambridge and Professor Anthony Low at Canberra, both of whom were breaking new ground on the subject at the time. But I have to confess that it never occurred to me to seek the answers at a South Asian university. The main schools of Indian research, as far as reputation was concerned, were all located elsewhere, outside the sub-continent. The *Orientalist* decoding of the knowledge I had been exposed to and the research I was about to embark on, which might have provided pause for thought, was still over a decade away.

Not that I was subsequently and entirely converted by the Said hypothesis anyway, so much as sufficiently alerted by it to the problems and pitfalls involved in the study of societies very different and far removed from our own. Like V.G. Kiernan, I seriously doubted that all "Western" scholars of the "Orient" had succumbed to *Orientalism* equally or that their analyses had been comprehensively distorted and devalued by it. Said had specifically directed his broadside at those Western scholars who had actually written during the period of Europe's imperialist expansion. Western students of the South Asian "Other" in the 1960s and beyond, however, were studying it against a different background of imperial retreat and indigenous advance, with a more egalitarian "world order" in the making. Perhaps there were residues of *Orientalism* in what themes were pursued in South Asian studies and in a lingering concern with the men who had ruled the sub-continent. But arguably, there were impulses of a different order beginning to infuse the study of South Asia and inform its shape and direction. Ranging from the nature of bilateral trading links to the extent of South Asian migrant influence, they operated to effect a qualitatively different, post-orientalist, "South Asia-mindedness."

While these facets will be canvassed later, suffice it at this juncture to point out that Britain, Australia, and New Zealand have also been able to draw on a broad background of shared association with the countries of South Asia, if not shared experience, to encourage an interest in the region. But it has been a shared association which, if growing out of the imperial connection, has nevertheless developed independently of and beyond it. All of them have derived similar parliamentary, bureaucratic, and legal institutions. They have had English in common, too. A sizeable proportion of the free press in South Asia has been written in English,

leading universities have retained it as their medium of instruction, and the Lok Sabha, the popular elected assembly of India, has not yet dispensed with it. South Asia, in short, can still be counted as belonging to the English-speaking world.

Then there has been the British Commonwealth to which they all belong as equal members. The Commonwealth, which evolved out of the transformation of the British Empire, is an organization not unlike the UN, but on a much smaller and more informal scale. Since 1947, when India and Pakistan led the way in agreeing to join it, it has provided an amenable, sometimes the only, forum for discussing matters of mutual concern and building closer ties. Working alliances, such as that reported between Prime Ministers R.J. Hawke⁶ of Australia and Rajiv Gandhi of India, have periodically been forged at Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings [CHOGMs] (Gurry 1990: 85–101). The CHOGM that met in Cyprus on 21 October, 1993, produced a united Protocol in favor of “Free Trade,” as others before it had produced Protocols, for example, against apartheid in South Africa. For South Asia, decolonization resulted not in an antagonistic severing of the imperial connection but a new interactive relationship based on friendship and accommodation through the familial Commonwealth Club.

By far the most consistent contact, however, has occurred at the level of sport. In this arena, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have regularly and variously met in gladiatorial contest on the playing fields of cricket, hockey, and squash. These are sports most countries have rarely encountered. But they are sports which, in Commonwealth countries especially, have generated passion and widespread following, none more so than the peculiarly English game of cricket. In the television age of instant entertainment and instant results, a country-to-country “test” match that takes up to five days to complete, is clearly out of the ordinary. Yet it attracts tens of thousands of informed and fanatical devotees wherever cricket is played, in Calcutta, Lahore, London, Auckland, or Melbourne. As for the cricketers who have performed at this highest, international level, they tend to be heroes throughout the playing world, regardless of country of origin. Alan Border, the Captain of Australia, is treated practically as a god in India, and Imran Khan of Pakistan would be instantly recognized in London, Sydney, or Wellington.

Not that cricket could ever be regarded as an integral aspect of South

⁶ R.J. Hawke was Prime Minister from March 1983 to December 1991.

Asian studies or that sporting exchanges like it were capable of providing the appropriate stimulus for them. Nor for that matter, should *Orientalism* be removed from calculation altogether as though it no longer applied. Such has been the impact of the Said-Inden argument that it continues to form the backdrop and the theoretical model against which cross-cultural area studies are usefully referenced and conceptually measured. The *Orientalist* critique still commends itself as a useful barometer for testing the climate of ideas they generate.

Empires in The Making⁷

What progress did Britain, Australia, and New Zealand make in chartings a South Asia course? The journey falls into three quite distinct phases. Fundamentally, it really only began when World War II ended. Before the war, if "South Asia-mindedness" figured at all, it had manifested in the form of indological and philological interest – essentially the study of classical cultures and languages. In Britain, the Scarborough Commission set up by the Foreign Office in 1944 discovered a virtually empty and barren landscape. There were pockets of expertise here and there, but nothing systematic or concentrated. Chairs of Sanskrit were sited at Oxford and Cambridge, for example. So too was a Chair of Eastern Religion and Ethics, which had been set up at Oxford shortly before the outbreak of war. London was more broadly served and in H.H. Dodwell⁸ had at least a Professor and support lecturers in what was called "The History of the British Dominions in Asia." Even so, only a handful of students had taken degrees in Indian studies at London University – in total a meagre 183 over 22 years, just four of whom were British. Little wonder that the Scarborough Report concluded that there was "little scope" for the "study of history at British universities" and even less for Indian geography, sociology, economics, and institutions. It was something of an

⁷ In covering the British situation, I would like to acknowledge the help of Professors David Arnold, Chris Bayly, V.G. Kiernan, Peter Marshall, W.H. Morris-Jones and Dr. Philip Woods. However, it should be said that I am entirely responsible for constructing the following account and for the way the valuable information they supplied has been cast.

⁸ Henry Hubert Dodwell (1879–1946), Professor of "The History of the British Dominions in Asia" at SOAS from 1916. Joint Editor of the old *Cambridge History of India*, writing much of Vol. IV: *British India, 1497-1857* (1929). See Hugh Tinker, "The Old and New Cambridge History of India," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 21(1): 432–8.

irony, therefore, that, at the very time India and Pakistan were achieving their independence, the Commission should recommend that knowledge of Asian countries be given "a permanent and growing place in British culture" (Philips 1967: 1-5). For up till then, despite the need to train colonial civil servants to preside over such societies, this had not been the case (Scarborough Report 1947: 92, 10). The type of knowledge that had been required was sufficient to facilitate ruling, not understanding.

Growth did occur in the wake of the Scarborough Report, but it was patchy and it soon petered out. Some of the "founding fathers" of South Asian history in Britain made their first appearances at this time. C.H. Philips succeeded Dodwell at SOAS in 1947, A.L. Basham launched his illustrious career at SOAS three years later, C.C. Davies went to Oxford, and Dr. Percival Spear, the author of perhaps the most durable of texts, the Penguin *History of India* Vol. 2, secured a position at Cambridge. Some of those who, like Ballhatchet, W.H. Morris-Jones, and Hugh Tinker, had acquired administrative or military experience in India during the war, also located jobs. But because the funding ran out in 1952 such expansion ground to an "abrupt halt" (Philips 1967: 2).

The real take-off occurred in the 1960s, the Hayter Commission this time doing the priming and setting the agenda.⁹ Of six new Asian Area Centres defined and subsequently installed, one was South Asian. This materialized at Cambridge in 1962 with B.H. Farmer as Director. The new emphasis was on broadening the range of teaching and research by involving the major social sciences and including studies on modern and contemporary Asian issues that had been up to then conspicuously missing. SOAS, Oxford, and Cambridge gained the most out of this second "kick start," forming a triangle of rival nerve centres of composite strength, not only at the undergraduate level but, impressively, at the postgraduate as well. Not that they had the field all to themselves. Sussex heralded its intention of becoming a serious player in Indian studies by enticing Anthony Low to leave Australia and Peter Reeves to join him. So the era of patron supervisors really began in this decade, with Ballhatchet, Basham, Davies, Gallagher, Low, Reeves, Stokes, Seal, and others attracting coterie of loyal followers and inspiring fierce competition between them. Statistically, the Postgraduate lists in "Indian" studies divulge an interesting trend. In 1961, of 43 names, only 14 appear *not* to be from South Asia. By 1970, that number had advanced to 34 out of 57,

⁹ *Report of the Sub-Committee on Oriental, Slavonic, East European and African Studies* (London, HMSO, 1961).

more than a two-fold increase. "South Asia-mindedness" had clearly arrived in Britain and it had arrived in numbers and research output, a moment that was symbolically captured in the launching of the scholarly journal, *Modern Asian Studies*, in 1967.

In Australia, "South Asia-mindedness" arrived too, partly as a result of the Hayter-inspired push in Britain – a spill-over effect can be observed – and partly because of the influence of Sir Keith Hancock. As Director of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies at London University from 1949–57, Hancock had experienced at first-hand the gravitational shifting in Britain's post-war "Asian" orbit. Appointed to head the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University in 1957, it was he who brought Anthony Low to Australia to get the study of India up and running. By 1970, in fact, it had not only started, it was surging forward, if predominantly in the area of history, a pre-dominance which is still evident. Another source for this "boom" could also be located in the concurrence of decolonization – the ridding by Asia of European rule – and the breaking away of Australia itself from dependence on Britain. While the establishment of South Asian studies in New Zealand was much more modest, so close were the connections between South Asianists in Australia and New Zealand that they operated at the time as a single "intellectual community." To some extent they still do (Catanach 1993: 137).

Such, anyway, was the interest generated in South Asia and the subsequent outpouring of research that the South Asian Studies Association [SASA]¹⁰ was set up in 1971, its charter to promote South Asian studies and build up a professional audience, not only in Australia and New Zealand but throughout the world. In a number of senses SASA was unique. It was the first body of South Asianists of its kind. It inspired rather than grew out of the larger, regionally uniting Asian Studies Association of Australia [ASAA] – which followed four years later. It predated by some fifteen years, BASAS, the British Association of South Asian Studies, which was modelled on similar lines. And it launched *South Asia*, like *Modern Asian Studies* a journal of scholarly research, but unlike it a journal entirely devoted to the Indian sub-continent. Above all, SASA was different because it was genuinely international, its reach extending to South Asianists wherever they resided, in Australia, America, India, and Europe. Certainly it extended to Heidelberg at the time, which

¹⁰ Originally established at SASANZ, the South Asian Studies Association of Australia and New Zealand.

provided financial backing to 1975. Today more than sixty-five per cent of SASA's membership is overseas-based.

Then came the 1980s and drift. In Britain and New Zealand South Asian studies were becalmed, in Australia they went backwards. What had gone wrong? The easy answer is that market-force philosophy was suddenly applied to universities as to all other areas of government. What was called "Thatcherite" economics promoted a regime of low funding in the public sector and competitive financing all round. That was the real explanation. In trimming their budgets, universities were forced to identify "areas of excellence" and to institute a rather nasty process of inter-area haggling. In this environment, South Asian studies lost out, because undergraduate numbers began to fall and because priority areas were determined by the amount of targetted government they could attract.

This was particularly true in Australia. The head-start that South Asian studies had acquired as a result of the 1960s expansion was pegged back. And it was pegged back principally by other "Asian" claimants for recognition - in the Indonesian, Japanese, Chinese, and Korean fields. These were the countries around the Pacific rim considered more economically immediate and significant to Australia's well-being. Although thrown the challenge by R.J. Hawke, the Prime Minister for most of the decade, to study "Asia" and to become "Asia-literate," Australia practically lost sight of the Indian sub-continent. It was in the wrong direction and it was in the wrong ocean. In the 1989 Garnaut Report, which the Prime Minister had commissioned, South Asia was officially excluded from the current definition of Asia (Garnaut 1989; Vicziany 1990: 145-66). The quest for Asia-literacy had seemingly erased India from the map.

Curiously, though, this blind spot, if it adversely affected funding to the South Asia area, did not affect the level of postgraduate enrolment and productivity. Of 454 doctoral and masters theses in all Asian areas written between 1983 and 1987, 128 or almost thirty per cent, related to South Asia (Ingleson 1988: 101). Sixty-four higher degrees were awarded to students working on India, the same number as for China, and almost double that for Japan. Academic interest in South Asia, regardless of relative Government and press indifference, remained strong. And even in this decade of downturn and decline, two new centres of South Asian Studies managed to emerge - at Perth and Sydney.¹¹

¹¹ Centre for Indian Ocean and Regional Studies at Curtin University in 1985 and

In Britain, the downturn did not seem to impact on South Asian studies specifically so much as to be part of a general malaise afflicting tertiary institutions as a whole. The job famine was in fact universal. SOAS was perhaps more noticeably affected, with a number of debilitating retirements and a more critical decline in the student population. But such had been the broad-based growth previously that the South Asian establishment, despite its sense of depression, retained a residual robustness. To an extent it fell back on this in 1986 when BASAS, the British Association of South Asian Studies, was formed. Although something of a defensive move given the circumstances, BASAS reflected a desire to give South Asianists a "collective base" for the first time.¹² Considering the traditional rivalry between London, Oxford, and Cambridge, which had operated to keep South Asianists apart, this was no mean achievement. However, it was just as well that Britain continued to attract graduates from South Asia itself. By 1992-3 the higher degree intake had fallen to pre-1960 levels - to 37, of which less than twenty per cent was British. According to Professor Marshall, this smacked perhaps of British universities resorting to poaching South Asian students again, rather than producing their own. Was this the 1950s revisited?¹³

Raj-Mindedness

So much for the physical construction of South Asian studies. What about their philosophical content? What kind of knowledge did they develop and proceed to promote? Since space does not permit an exhaustive evaluation of the disciplinary mix involved, the focus will fall mainly on the historiographical dimension - the dimension I am most familiar with as an historian myself. As one of the first disciplines in the field and one of the strongest, history commends itself as potentially illustrative. For not only did it establish the early parameters of investigation, it remained firmly at the centre of most subsequent remodelling. At any event, from even this restricted perspective of the terrain covered by South Asian studies, certain general features stand out.

The most obvious and clearly visible is the broad linguistic base from

centre for Indian Studies at Sydney University in 1988.

¹² See circular letter from David Arnold, John Harris and Colin Simmons proposing the establishment of a South Asian Studies Association, Autumn 1985.

¹³ P.J. Marshall to H.V. Brasted, 23 August 1993.

which South Asian studies in Britain has benefited, but which has been noticeably and perilously absent in Australia and New Zealand. Sanskrit has been the exception perhaps. Indeed, not only has it survived, but the strength of its survival may be gauged from the fact that the International Sanskrit Congress held its triennial meeting in Melbourne in January 1994. But Hindi, with one tenured academic in Australia to superintend and sustain a university sequence of courses, faces extinction. And neither it nor any other contemporary South Asian language is currently taught in the school system, whether state-run or private (Melbourne South Asian Studies Group, 1991: xii, 17, 21, 24). Where South Asia is concerned, Australia risks becoming tongue-tied or completely mute.

That Britain has been and continues to be so much better served linguistically derives from the "days of empire" and the pragmatic requirement of training imperial administrators. The road that led from school to colonial frontier necessarily involved the acquisition of languages required to facilitate dominion. SOAS, whose range of South Asian offerings remains impressive, owed its origin to such colonial servicing. Not that the offering of a language necessarily indicated a great demand for it. The story, doubtless apocryphal, is told of the SOAS Professor who, when examining a student in Pushtu in 1947, used the paper of 1897, the last time one had been set.

What is clearly visible too was just how "raj"-oriented the history and politics of South Asia has tended to be. That imperial strains should resound in the South Asian overture of 1947 was understandable. Britain's disengagement from the sub-continent that had been so central to its identity as a great power, was a story waiting to be told. But so too, it transpired, was the complete story of the British-Indian encounter. The coming of the raj was almost as much a blank page as its going. In fact, Volumes IV and V of the *Cambridge History of India* (1929, 1932), which Dodwell had edited, represented the first substantial writings on that encounter since James Mill's six volume, *orientalist*-style, work a hundred years before (Philips 1961: 228-9). The early focus therefore was almost totally on British India, its origins, its imperial ethos, its administrative policies, and its record of achievement. Much of this amounted in effect to British imperial study, a study in which "Indians" were hardly seen, let alone allowed to play a significant part. They were essentially bystanders in this drama.

Even when the emphasis shifted to the nationalist movement, as it did in the 1960s, it was still essentially within the framework of British interpretative explanation - the overse side of the imperial coin. Thus British

rule was unfolded on the "Indian" side less in terms of enlightenment and constructive nation-building activity, than of blatant exploitation and distorted and stunted development. Likewise, devolution was attributed to Indian nationalist pressure and the breakdown of colonial administration, as diametrically distinct from British constitutional planning. The overture had been replaced by a movement of discordant, though still conventional, debate.

But essentially it was a debate that British, Australian, New Zealand, and American "South Asianists" seemed for much of this period to be conducting between themselves. The scholarship coming out of the sub-continent was largely ignored. It ran parallel but the intersections were few. Besides, whenever the Indian "problem" looked like being reclaimed by South Asian scholars, it was wrested back by simply changing the question or widening it. Out of Canberra, for example, came Low's collective *Soundings*, which posited a "new direction" in terms of extracting all-India significance from a variety of regional developments. Even if unsure of the dominant "benchmarks" of modern South Asian history, the scholars he led saw themselves as "sepoys" or "humble foot soldiers" sign-posting the way forward (Low 1968). They subsequently went on to expose the rich peasant base from which Congress launched its successful 1937 electoral campaign (Kumar 1971; Low 1977).

But the most far-reaching challenge was mounted by the Cambridge "school" of historians, inspired by Gallagher and Seal, who turned the equation of nationalist politics on its head and led scholars away from the simple adventures of Gandhi and Nehru. In their collective works they revealed the nationalist movement not as an ideologically committed force of do-or-die patriots bent on overturning the British colonial state, but as groups of competing elites prepared to collaborate with it in return for favors and patronage. In this milieu of self-interested advancement, the dynamic of change emerged less from monolithic national pressure, than from successive attempts by the British to maintain the basis of their control by means of constitutional deals. Here was an accommodating rather than antagonistic relationship between nationalism and imperialism. Despite its obvious cynicism, this Cambridge construct became orthodoxy for a generation.¹⁴

¹⁴ A. Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (London, 1968) provided the initial framework. Elite theory was subsequently modified but not dispensed with in J. Gallagher, G. Johnson and A. Seal (eds.), *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays on Indian Politics, 1870-1940* (London, 1973).

The opening up of public and private collections, particularly throughout the 1970s, further served to thicken the plot, but effectively by re-opening familiar debates rather than introducing new ones. The serial publication of the official *Transfer of Power* documents edited by P.N.S. Mansergh, returned the spotlight to issues pertaining to decolonization and the search for its overriding determinants. Political study thus back-tracked with a passion to British policy-makers and central nationalist figures, to the deliberations of Cabinet and Party rooms, to the "end game of empire" and constitutional brinkmanship. This was still "history from above," elite history with most of the players and much of the "South Asian" play missing. Once again British "imperial" historians entered the fray, like John Darwin and R.F. Holland (Darwin 1988, 1989; Holland 1984: 165-86; 1985), and they proceeded to divert attention to metropolitan factors, to Britain's financial weakness and its concern to preserve great power status. The decision to leave India was consequently presented in yet another light, as an act of market-force severance, the result of pragmatic cost accounting and diplomatic regrouping (Brasted, Bridge, Kent 1994; Brasted and Bridge, 1994).

Apart from the issue of decolonization, however, which continued to be explored and explained in separate, seldom connected settings, the 1980s gradually brought a significant degree of analytical convergence. Even the nationalist discords were harmonized by the "subalternist" adjustment of moving nationalism out of the arena of high politics and into the "people's domain." Thus, if it was not amenable elites who took the fight to the British, it was unamenable subalterns - peasants, tribals, workers, the populace in general. Not that the elites were entirely eliminated. The virtue of "subalterneity" was that it incorporated elites too as "subalterns" where they opposed British rule - the factor of opposition being the classifying activity. Here was an historical approach not strictly from "below" as claimed, but much closer to the middle.¹⁵

The explanation of this growing analytical accord lies in the factor of globalization. This occurred at the level of personnel with more and more scholars from South Asia securing key positions in British, Australian, and New Zealand universities. Pertinent examples were Tapan Raychaudhuri, who established a base at Oxford, Sinnappah Arasaratnam, who became President of SASA at Armidale, and Ranajit Guha,

¹⁵ See Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi, 1982), especially Introductory Chapter, pp.1-8. This series now runs into six volumes. For a review of subaltern theory see J. Masselos, "the Dis/Appearance of Subalterns: A Reading of a Decade of Subaltern Studies," *South Asia*, 15(1): 105-125.

“subalternist-in-chief,” who orchestrated subaltern studies from Canberra. His contingent of contributing authors was drawn from all over the world. The *New Cambridge History of India*, presented through a series of individual monographs, is similarly representative. But importantly, globalization occurred at the level of methodology as well. Increasingly interested in the same things, South Asianists appeared then, and appear even more so in the 1990s, to be conditioned by the same approaches. Writings in South Asian studies everywhere have become marked by an inter-disciplinary theoretical orientation, whether inspired by Gramsci, Foucault, ethnohistory, or discourse analysis. Shades of a neo-orientalism emerging perhaps?

The Road Ahead

Where do South Asian studies in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand go from here? I would like to say onwards. But not only is the destination uncertain, so too is the drive to get there. There are a number of bends in the road and diversions leading off it.

On the positive side, South Asian studies are at least well organized to continue the journey. In Britain, BASAS has a membership of over 230, and in Australia, SASA has been joined by high-profile, public-funded institutions like the National Centre and the Australia-India Council, to concert a three-pronged campaign of public and political education. In fact the first battle has already been won. In 1990 the Australian Senate reported how “underdeveloped” Australian-Indian relations were and argued for their immediate redress.¹⁶ Not that it necessarily had the furthering of South Asian studies in mind, so much as the fostering of trading links. But the two are not unconnected.

Intellectually, South Asian studies are better equipped too, to develop an understanding of the region in its own terms. *Orientalism* has had something to do with this of course. But the reappropriating, or rather the rescuing, of the study of South Asia from a lingering British orientation has had arguably more. The ideological pull which the British Empire was able to exert, despite its collapse, has gradually and logically given way to the growing attraction of more contemporary happenings and their explanation. This is a landscape which South Asia alone inhab-

¹⁶ Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *Australia-India Relations: Trade and Security* (Canberra, AGPS, July 1990).

its and can claim. For where the colonial past was concerned, it had to share this with, and for much of the time to surrender it to, Britain. Understanding this aspect of South Asia had ultimately been an exercise in understanding the relationship between them. Almost fifty years after independence, a much different South Asia beckons to be discovered.

But why would Britain, Australia, and New Zealand wish to discover it, the question that began this paper? Unless they do, however, South Asian studies face an uphill struggle to retain their present strength, or even to secure their ultimate survival. For clearly the factors that had originally fuelled a degree of "South Asia-mindedness" can no longer be relied upon. Imperial patriotism has given way to a kind of imperial amnesia, which not even the dramatization of E.M. Forster's *Passage to India*, Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet*, and Gandhi's life by Richard Attenborough have been able to arrest for long. As for the focus on decolonization, a process that has become less intriguing with familiarity, this has shifted to the former African and Middle-eastern "colonies" with the current serialization of British official documents concerning them.¹⁷ And South Asia itself seems less exciting a region, diplomatically, than when Jawaharlal Nehru tried to form a world power bloc of non-aligned nations. Different preoccupations are coming into calculation.

In Britain's case, a new variable clearly affecting the outcome has been the size of "South Asian" immigration. Certainly the development of substantial Indian, and Pakistani communities in London, Birmingham, Bradford, Leicester, etc., has rendered events in South Asia much more immediate. The storming of the *Babri* mosque at Ayodhya by Hindu fundamentalists in December 1992 was followed soon after in Britain by a spate of burnings of both mosques and temples. In a sense, Britain has become an extended battle-ground for the communal and ethnic conflicts that are being fought out in South Asia. Of more than academic interest too has been the Muslim campaign for separate schools in Britain and the Muslim fury over Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. "Fundamentalism," "communalism," and "ethnicity" have become live issues that may stimulate a British demand to study them more closely, a demand likely to be reinforced by the South Asian communities themselves. There is evidence of this beginning to happen especially in the regional universities like Hull and in the endowing of specific South Asia lectureships.

¹⁷ See *British Documents on the End of Empire*, a series under the General Editorship of D.A. Low, the first volume of which appeared in 1992.

Also continuing to sustain South Asian studies in Britain are its impressive and unique archival holdings. What European summer has not been characterized by an annual pilgrimage of South Asianists from around the world to the India Office Library or the Public Record Office in London? Even if British student numbers drop off into insignificance, there is still little sign of overseas enrolments for Ph.Ds in British universities drying up – a prohibitive fee structure being the only thing likely to bring this about. Indeed, the era of patron supervisors is not obviously waning, even if the personnel is changing. Ballhatchet has simply been replaced by David Arnold at SOAS, while Chris Bayly has inherited the mantle at Cambridge.

In Australia and New Zealand it is not a South Asian immigrant presence that is a key factor – it is small and silent – or rich depositories of research material, but the condition of the trading relationship. Commercially, South Asia has never been integral to their interests, just 1.2 per cent of Australia's exports going to India in 1987–8 for instance (Melbourne South Asian Studies Group 1991: 5, 12, 13). But just how significant a variable this is likely to be may be gauged by the Australian Government's recent investment in and promotion of Japanese and Korean studies. If their example is anything to go by, the prerequisite for South Asian studies to advance again is for the countries in the region to become economic "tigers" themselves. Where education seems increasingly to be economically-driven the message is clear. Without a solid material base, area studies are unlikely to receive the impetus needed for extensive and on-going cultural inquiry.

In the meantime, much will depend in Australia at least on the efforts of the Australia-India Council [AIC] and the National Centre for South Asian Studies to lay the foundations for a more intrinsic and durable "South Asia-mindedness." A recent initiative in this direction by the AIC was "India Today," a month-long program of activities¹⁸ – cultural, culinary and commercial – which was designed to give Australians a taste of India's attractions and alert them to its diverse potential. Needless to say there was the mandatory cricket match between the two countries as well. For its part the National Centre, a joint project between the Australian Government and a consortium of seven universities,¹⁹ has adopted a broad strategy of promoting South Asian languages at the school level,

¹⁸ 17 April to 16 May 1994.

¹⁹ The Australian National University, Curtin, Deakin, La Trobe, Monash, New England and Swinburne.

facilitating university research through the installation of an electronic data-base system, and serving government, business, and the media as a clearing house of South Asian expertise. Essentially its role, as the shop-front of South Asian studies in Australia, is a facilitating one, its thrust jointly developmental, scholarly, and entrepreneurial. Initially it has been given three years to achieve results.

Given that the prospects for South Asian studies look brighter than for any time since 1980, it is nonetheless unlikely that they will attain the kind of preeminence that in Australia they exercised over other areas in the period 1947–70. Vigorous survival rather than on-going expansion is probably the most that can be achieved. If this conclusion appears a little negative, it is because the British, Australian, and New Zealand experiences have clearly revealed a shifting and volatile pattern of interest and attraction. With decolonization rampant, Britain became totally obsessed with Europe, Australia showed no constancy at all, turning from India to Indonesia to Japan, while New Zealand, with its large Polynesian population, found the allure of the Pacific difficult to resist. Love affairs have a tendency to wane with aging and I suspect that at some point the plight of European, Japanese, and Pacific studies will be bemoaned in turn by their respective suitors. The question is that in a world of shifting commitments, can old relationships be rekindled? That is the imponderable which South Asian studies are currently confronting.

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