

## **Introduction**

In the opening pages of her travelogue, *Empires of the Indus*, the writer Alice Albinia notes with irony that the modern nation-state 'India' derives its name from a river located largely within the borders of 'Pakistan'. The latter's name, which means 'Land of the Pure', suggests a piety unmarked by the influence of its Hindu-majority neighbor. Given that the Indus – also known as the 'Sindhu', praised by Sanskrit priests in the Rig Veda thousands of years ago - runs the length of the Muslim majority state born in 1947, it would have been perfectly logical, at the time of partition, for it to have been named 'Industan', or perhaps even 'India'.

Whatever the aspiration to diverge from one another suggested by their names, seven continuous decades of parallel capitalist development have ensured their respective crisis-ridden societies and environments remain comparable and inextricably linked. And yet, the political geography of South Asia today is ordered less by any sense of their shared past and present than the enmities that have come to obscure them. All sixty-eight years of India and Pakistan's existence have been marked by threats and realities of internecine war. Confrontation is now marked by a grim undertone of nuclear potentiality. Restrictive visa regimes have rendered dialogue between progressive voices virtually impossible in recent years, hindering the development of much needed transnational and comparative thinking about their combined contemporary predicament.

Between April 5 and 7, 2013, the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) convened ‘Asian Ecologies: Capitalism, Modernity and the Environment.’ The conference, where the accompanying papers were first presented, was designed to bring scholars and activists on both sides of our region’s most hostile border into dialogue to identify and develop common areas of interest and concern. We were convinced of the need to establish South Asia as a site of debate and knowledge production about itself, and, as explained in the article that follows this introduction, felt that doing so within a framework encompassing Asia’s other sub-regions would serve to highlight helpful South-South comparisons and connections. These, it was hoped, might speak critically to the proliferating discourse about Asia as a continent, too much of which is celebratory and insufficiently attentive to the ecological implications of deepening economic liberalisation.

In conceptual terms, our framework is derived not so much from debates about ‘multiple modernities’, in which too many participants overlook the fundamental singularity of global capitalism. It is rather, following Schmidt (2006), premised on the view that there exist *varieties within* capitalist modernity. Inquiry, it follows, must centre on what can be said about South Asian capitalism from a perspective that foregrounds changing human relationships with the physical environment. Selected from the conference proceedings for their treatment of particular issues such as land, water, biodiversity and livestock that are axial to ecology in all parts of the world, the articles in this special issue probe this

concern by focusing on ecological processes in a range of case studies across India and Pakistan. Any number of notable exclusions from this list could of course be pointed out. The extraordinary geo-physical and cultural diversity of both India and Pakistan, South Asia and the Asian continent, reflected in the oceanic body of writings on their pasts and present ecologies, means our engagement with each of these terms (spelled out in the chapter that follows) is necessarily limited, partial and determined by conscious priorities.

Nancy Fraser notes that capitalism has tended to see nature as a limitless supplier of “raw material,” evident in a discursive hardening of the distinction between nature and the economic realm, human nature and non-human nature (Fraser 2014, 63). The conception of ‘ecology’ that underscored our discussions, in contrast, was informed by a view of the natural world as changing and bound with human agency – namely, the drive to exploit the environment for principles of profit maximization and bulwarking political control. Historically, this (largely unhappy) relationship took shape in the interplay of capitalism (or its socialist alternatives), the environment, which here may be taken as the natural world that human agency acts upon, and finally, modernity, a continuous process of accelerated transformations of state and societal structures and relations. According to Marshall Berman (1988), these modern transformations marked a traumatic departure from tradition and triggered a profound break from the past in which, as Fraser notes, “the rhythms of social life were in many respects adapted to those of nonhuman nature” (2014, 63). As readers of this journal are well-aware, these ruptures have resulted in enormous social dislocation and generated violent ecological imbalances across the world

with devastating implications for its indigenous peoples in particular: from the Tar Sands in Alberta, Canada, to the clear-cutting of the Amazon, to the destruction of Ogoniland in Nigeria, modernity can justifiably be narrated as a story of loss, erasure and obliteration.

We would contend that modernity's appropriation and renewal of traditions and extant social structures is one of its defining features. This is particularly evident in colonial contexts such as South Asia where the reification and recalibration of identity markers served and directed logics of accumulation, defining the parameters of modern eco-governance in both India and Pakistan. In Punjab, for instance, British rule aligned itself with hereditary landed elites in a manner not dissimilar to the Mughals and Sikhs under Ranjit Singh. At the same time, colonial sociology delineated which of the regions' 'tribes' were suited to agriculture. Land grants were dispensed accordingly, and, in combination with a vast complex of perennially irrigated 'canal colonies' – the most ambitious project of hydraulic engineering anywhere at the time – etched a new understanding of 'native' society onto the landscape itself.

If a good deal has been written about this process by Imran Ali, David Gilmartin and other leading historians of the Punjab, Caton's contribution (this issue) sheds light on previously understudied aspects of colonial modernity's complex blending of continuity and change. Arguing that the Marxist tradition has generally overlooked the importance of livestock in economic life, he develops the concept of 'animal capital'. Then, charting the gradual erosion of animals' economic importance in parts of the Punjab subsequently

naturalized as agricultural, he shows how wealth based on herd size, once *the* principle repository of social standing, was converted into land or real estate. As such, he historicizes a process that is frequently thought of as an incomplete transition to capitalism, showing how British rule institutionalised new forms of value and fashioned landed elites erroneously thought of as remnants of a distant feudal past.

Caton's essay would appear to support David Graeber's recent calls for thinking about capitalism as a system of value-creation that operates on the basis of symbolic forms. As such, alterations in subjective perception are no less important than objective changes, a point underscored by Hill's article, which presents research on 'hybrid rice' from Jharkhand in contemporary India. Among farmers, we learn, traditional methods of measurement derived from the materiality of rice itself such as taste are losing their importance thanks to new conceptions of crop yield pushed by advocates and advertisers. The advance of capitalism, this suggests, is often established through propaganda rather than based on actual results. It dictates a certain disposition towards 'science' and 'progress', representing technology as a 'silver bullet' or 'quick fix' for problems framed in terms of scarcity.

Our own contribution places this case and other recent developments in commercial agriculture within their wider historical and geographical context, working inwards from 'Asia's frequent subjection to Malthusian frameworks during the Cold War. Neo-liberalism, we argue, goes beyond a mere continuation of that which was initiated during

the Green Revolution, extending that which is considered a resource and subjected to laws of profit. In material terms, this is reflected in the increased scope of privatization - both spatially, in terms of the rural areas absorbed which now include zones once thought of as the 'Fourth World' (see Hill) and in terms of the extent to which resources themselves are further commoditized. Farhat Naz's study of ground water pumping in Gujarat (also this issue) paints an alarming portrait of the way in which private power and access to technology based on wealth and landownership has been extended and reinforced by the deepening privatization of water over the last decades in parts of Gujarat. As in Caton's analysis of animal value's displacement by land, resources are shown to be socially constructed and convertible: with the mechanical power to dig deeper than competitors, the 'feudal' landlord is now a 'waterlord'.

If Naz's case study sheds light on the privatization of water at the sub-national (federal) state and village (micro) level, Hill's considers the global dynamics of agro-technology, providing an empirical sense of how corporate capital interfaces with the post-colonial state at numerous scales. Although, as he makes clear, research on rice has roots in colonial India and Cold War reference points in the United States, it is increasingly directed by multinational companies through a complex re-scaling of the post-colonial state. Nowadays, indigenous scientists (with foreign funding) play Trojan Horse, helping private power gain footing with 'research' that advances dubious claims about agro-technology's supposedly magical powers of productivity and nutrition. 'Objective' science, once more, proves to be anything but.

For the South, the question of sovereignty and how it is circumvented remains paramount in the age of globalization, with capital operating through new local and international channels that bypass the problem of national-state protections. Monsanto's recent forays into Pakistan, together with other widely reported controversial instances of multinationals selling GM crop seeds in Bangladesh suggests 're-scaling' is an important area for further comparative research, not least because in Pakistan, as in India, international capital has been pressing for public indemnity against risk by approaching governments at the sub-national (in this case provincial) level. Taken together with the impressive way in which multinationals 'venue shop' across the Asian region for the best (worst) conditions to exploit cheap labour (as evidenced in recent factory fires in Pakistan and Bangladesh), we begin to understand just how many options - vertical and horizontal - corporate capital possesses in the age of globalization: if India raises wages, shift production to Bangladesh; if Pakistan makes a fuss, approach the Punjab government directly.

What, in the face of all this, is being done? In historical terms, socialism has been a largely underground project in Pakistan, in contrast to the Indian experience where it has enjoyed lengthy stints in government at the sub-national level. And yet, confronted by capital's latest advance, the Left in Pakistan is quietly building new facts on the ground, reflected in a recent merger that for now at least, has brought diverse generations of activists into dialogue and collaboration. Akhtar's contribution, which emphasizes the

ongoing relevance of political parties and elections for socialist struggle, is evidence of political convergence in South Asia, whereby formal democracy is now everywhere the norm rather than an (Indian) exception. It is also, as he points out, premised on the realization reached from over two decades of struggling in the wilderness, in which the Left's crowning achievements came arguably in Latin America. This last note of inspiration from a far away continent is a reminder that South Asia, in this special issue, is not to be viewed in isolation. Just as capital transgresses the globe, so must dialogue between socialisms. Across continents, the absence of such exchange is a hindrance. Among neighbors such as India and Pakistan, it is a major stumbling block to devising new and effective modes of struggle for social justice in a region whose environment and population – the largest in the world – deserves better.

## **References**

Schmidt, Volker H. 2006 "Multiple Modernities or Varieties of Modernity" in *Current Sociology* 54:1 pp77-97.