Comparative Perspectives on the Long Twentieth Century

M.S. Merian – R. Tagore International Centre of Advanced Studies
Metamorphoses of the Political

SHORT-TERM FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMME 2020 – 2021

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The ideas of ‘politics’ and the ‘political’ have become a key point of discussion in contemporary social science, philosophy and cultural history. Today, ‘the political’ changes its form continuously, encompassing new fields of social practice. At ICAS:MP, questions about the shifting nature of ‘the political’ are being addressed through sustained focus on seven Thematic Modules (TMs). These TMs engage the Metamorphoses of the Political from distinctive points of departure and multiple theoretical perspectives. These TMs are:

1. History as a Political Category
2. Labour as a Political Category
3. Critiques and Renewals of Democracy
4. Normative Conflicts and Transformations
5. The Challenge of Gender
6. Political Economy of Growth and Distribution
7. Media and the Constitution of the Political

Present Directors
Sanjay Kumar, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi
Martin Fuchs, Max-Weber-Kolleg (MWK), University of Erfurt, Erfurt

The M.S. Merian – R. Tagore International Centre of Advanced Studies ‘Metamorphoses of the Political’ (ICAS:MP) is an Indo-German research collaboration of six Indian and German institutions. These are:
• Centre for Modern Indian Studies (CeMIS), University of Göttingen
• Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi
• Institute of Economic Growth (IEG), Delhi
• Max-Weber-Kolleg (MWK), University of Erfurt
• Max Weber Stiftung (MWS) with its German Historical Institute, London (GHIL)
• Würzburg Centre for Modern India (WCMI), University of Würzburg

ICAS:MP combines the benefits of an open, interdisciplinary forum for intellectual exchange with the advantages of a cutting-edge research centre. Located in New Delhi, ICAS:MP critically intervenes in global debates in the social sciences and humanities. Through its innovative modular and network structure, ICAS:MP brings together and generates sustainable research cooperation among more than 100 scholars with diverse disciplinary backgrounds from India, Germany and other countries.

At the core of ICAS:MP is an extensive fellowship programme for internationally renowned senior scholars as well as for outstanding post-doctoral fellows. Every academic year, 10–15 short-term fellows are hosted at the office in New Delhi for 3–7 months.
As part of my term as a fellow at ICAS MP, I seek to examine three contemporary student movements to understand how categories of the ‘other’ are constructed and reproduced by the Rights discourse and the role played by the media in shaping this construction. I will study these movements through oral narratives captured and restored by the public archive ‘Campus Uprising’ to produce a journal article. The archival oral history accounts will be buttressed by interviews of critical actors identified during the archival examination.

The student movements that will be studied are the students uprising of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in early 2016, the movement of Hyderabad Central University students against caste atrocities and the death of Rohit Vemula, and, finally, the movement of Banaras Hindu University students in 2017 against gender-based discrimination, abuse and oppression. The movements will be examined using the central questions: How are categories of the ‘other’ constructed and reproduced by the Rights discourse? What is the role played by the media in shaping this construction?

I intend to examine these questions through three interrelated lines of enquiry, which will comprise three sections of my proposed paper. The first relates to the quotidian politics of student organizations. How does the everyday functioning of student unions contribute to political understanding of a student movement? Through oral histories of students, I will unpack the mechanisms of student mobilization, the process of their enrolment, everyday transaction, the issues they take up and the way association with the unions shape the identity of their members. I seek to understand, the materiality of the participation in these spaces, the voices and silences and how these spaces are negotiated. The second will focus on the experiences of students’ mobilizations. How do the experiences of association of students construct and negotiate categories of class, caste and gender within spaces of the campus and how do these experiences order mobilizations around them? Third will examine the role played by the media in this process. How do newer media strategies and technologies make and remake the field of contestation? How does it contribute to the construction of the ‘other’?

Aheli Choudhury has a PhD in sociology from Delhi School of Economics. She straddles between being a grassroots activist deeply involved in various grassroots work, rights-based and student movements and being a researcher. Her research interests lie in understanding functioning of the state, emergence of social movements and the interaction of media with these processes. She has been associated with different national and international institutes such as the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK; CeMIS, University of Gottingen, Germany; Centre of South Asian Studies (CNRS-EHESS), Paris and Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS).
This project aims at the re-examination of the concept of ‘transformative constitutionalism’ through the detailed case study of a key event in its Indian career – the 42nd Constitutional Amendment of 1976. This amendment, during the Internal Emergency of 1975–77, was the most thoroughgoing and radical constitutional amendment in post-independence Indian history. It was the culmination of a turbulent decade in India’s political and constitutional history – a period during which the survival of India’s 1950 Constitution was threatened like never before or since. Indeed, this period saw, ‘the great war, as distinct from earlier skirmishes, over parliamentary versus judicial supremacy’, as Granville Austin would later call it. The irony is that the political onslaught against the textual framework of the Indian constitution was led in the name of the constitutionally promised agenda of socio-economic transformation, embodied in the chapter on Directive Principles of State Policy. These directives were strictly speaking, non-enforceable, but these fourteen legally non-binding provisions of the Constitution were repeatedly invoked in this period to trump the other provisions of the constitutional text, which were legally binding.

While the rhetoric of constitutional aims trumping constitutional rights was a recurring theme throughout the constitutional debates of this period, its apogee was the 42nd amendment. My focus will be on the introduction of Article 31C, which provided that laws declared by Parliament to be implementing Directive Principles could no longer be declared invalid even if they violated the Right to Equality, Freedom and Property. This provision was the defining feature of the 1976 amendment as it explicitly declared that state goals of socio-economic transformation trumped fundamental rights. Much of the public discourse around the 42nd amendment too was centred on this provision. Studying the complex career of this provision helps us better understand the challenge posed by statist transformative constitutionalism to the liberalism professed in the Indian constitution of 1950.

Anuj Bhuwania is a professor at Jindal Global Law School, Sonipat. He has previously held teaching positions at South Asian University and Ambedkar University, Delhi. He has also held visiting positions at the Centre for Modern Indian Studies, University of Göttingen; Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS); and Centre for the Study of Law and Governance (CSLG), Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. He is the author of Courting the People: Public Interest Litigation in Post-Emergency India published by Cambridge University Press in 2017.

Transformative Constitutionalism and Authoritarian Populism in India: The 42nd Constitutional Amendment of 1976

As Indian civil society struggles with the rise of Hindu nationalism, women’s access to Hindu sacred spaces has emerged as a particularly high-profile point of contention. No religious institution has drawn more attention in this regard than the temple at Sabarimala, Kerala, which has long excluded women aged 10–50 from its premises on religious grounds. Indeed, Sabarimala turned into a key campaign issue during India’s 2019 national elections as the Bharatiya Janata Party successfully used legal challenges to the temple’s traditions as a rallying point for its electoral base across the country. What’s more, at the end of 2019, Sabarimala played a significant role in determining the legacy of one of India’s most controversial Chief Justices – Ranjan Gogoi – when he recommended that the Sabarimala litigation be used as the grounds for a significant reconsideration of Indian religious freedom jurisprudence.

This book project draws on extensive ethnographic, legal, and historical research to argue that the Sabarimala dispute demonstrates both the promise and the perils of India’s flexible approach to religion-state relations. The book makes several broad arguments. First, rather than either separating or integrating religion and public life, India has chosen to do both and to maintain a kind of ‘dynamic equilibrium’ between the two approaches; the various stages of the Sabarimala dispute illustrate the ways in which this strategy has and has not been successful. Second, and notwithstanding recent legal scholarship that is critical of ‘juristocracy’, judicially led religious reforms like those that have shaped the Sabarimala dispute can have immense positive potential. At the same time, court-led reform places a heavy responsibility on the judiciary to engage thoroughly and thoughtfully with multiple parties – and as the battle for Sabarimala also makes clear, the courts do not always fulfill this obligation. Finally, the project further develops our understanding of women’s roles in intracommunal conflict over religious spaces by exploring how Hindu women campaigned both for and against Sabarimala’s exclusionary practices.

Deepa Das Acevedo is a legal anthropologist and law professor at the University of Alabama; she received her JD and PhD from the University of Chicago. Her monograph, The Battle for Sabarimala, is forthcoming with Oxford, and her scholarship has appeared in, among others, Law & Social Inquiry, the American Journal of Comparative Law, and the Asian Journal of Law & Society.

The Battle for Sabarimala

Deepa Das Acevedo
HEENA

The Working Women in Pre-Colonial Awadh (1750s–1850s)

Based on hitherto neglected and unexplored Urdu, Persian, and English sources, this research attempts to do a social history of women and work in pre-colonial Awadh (present-day Uttar Pradesh). It examines the world of women as domestic labourers and as employees of the state. By doing so, it disturbs various layers of our received understanding. Firstly, women workers were not just located in the entertainment, leisure, and sex work arena as tawaifs, randis, and in more cultured engagements such as adab, muja, poetry, or in the administration as powerful rulers. Secondly, sources used in this project indicate that female workers possessed varieties of skills and specialized knowledge to be recruited as domestic workers in royal and elite households and as artisans, trained soldiers, and spies in civil and military administration. This project will discuss the world of female domestic servants in Nawabi and elite households focusing on issues of master-servants relationship, servants’ relationship with master’s family, wage payment, and working hours. It will also explore the hierarchized world of labour that resists fitting in the modern homogenized category of the servant. By diffusing the workspace of women in this period, the study will see women as actively working in military regiments, espionage departments and other non-household occupations. Their role as active participants in the revolt of 1857, sometimes as leaders and sometimes as passive participants have been studied by scholars. But what is significant and missing is the existence and the making of these soldiers much before the revolt.

Heena received her PhD in History from Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi. Her thesis examined the rebel administration of Delhi during the revolt of 1857. Based on shakasta Urdu, Persian, and English sources, the work examined rebels’ concept of administration and Delhites’ experience of the rebel administration during the sudden abrupt of the power. Before this, she finished her MPhil from the University of Delhi. For her dissertation, she studied and examined two Urdu weekly newspapers from Delhi (Dehli Urdu Akhbar) and Lucknow (Tilism-e-Lucknow) to understand the indigenous discourse of the revolt of 1857.

Pedagogies of Development, Conceptions of Efficiency: The Rural Analogues of ‘Democratic Managerialism’

During the ICAS:MP fellowship, I will be further developing my research on the history of technocratic ‘rural management’ in the realm of agrarian and dairy production in the Kheda/Anand region in Gujarat and how a peculiar chapter of developmentalist governance was scripted in these regions over the decades between the 1950s and the 1980s. Tentatively titled as Pedagogies of Development, Conceptions of Efficiency: The Industrial and Rural Analogues of Modern Managerialism in Western India, c. 1950–1979, the fellowship project will follow the trajectories of a team of textile industrialists from Ahmedabad (western India), UN-funded developmental pedagogues, and Ford Foundation consultants, as they conducted experiments and programs across the rural-agrarian and urban-industrial regions of western India to establish the putative validity of managerial leadership in the first three decades of independence. It will track the discourses and practices of certain key figures who traversed the overlapping worlds of the state administrative offices on the one hand, and private businesses and industries on the other hand. In the process, the project will trace the global shifts in the post-World War II period – fraught with Cold War anxieties – which generated the emergence of managerialism as an abstract organizational norm, as opposed to bureaucracies, for forming modern/ rational capitalist democracies. Further, the project aims to specifically understand how such global frameworks emerging from the world of private companies and big business were translated within the context of the developmental discourse in post-independence India, and the relationship of the then emerging field of managerial sciences with the concerns of the postcolonial state, fidal networks of capital, labour productivity and industrial technologies.

The first half of the project will track certain experiments on organizational reforms that were conducted by the aforementioned Indian and global experts of managerialism in the factory sheds of Ahmedabad in western India. The second half of the project will reveal how this Ahmedabad-based global network of technological, developmental and managerial experts spilled over to the western Indian countryside and produced peculiar ‘managerialist’ reflections on the social constitution of the ‘village society’. On a broader stroke, the project will show how these rationales, networks and interventions formed the palimpsest upon which the foundational arguments for the establishment of certain key management institutions of western India – such as the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) in the 1960s and the Indian Institute of Rural Management Anand (IRMA) in the late 1970s – were posed.

Kena Wani graduated with a doctoral degree in History from Duke University in 2020. Her doctoral dissertation titled Remaking Capital: Business, Technology and Development Ambitions in Twentieth-Century Western India studied the participation of commercial and business actors within developmental endeavours shaping urban, industrial and rural worlds of western India over the colonial-postcolonial conjuncture.
Urbanization – Opportunity or Challenge for Child Health in India

Urbanization eradicates undernutrition because it increases the availability and access to food products. Children benefit in particular: because of adequate nutrition they are able to grow to their full potential. However, urbanization increases the access to and availability of foods rich in fats and sugar. The consumption of such foods causes child obesity. While a country is undergoing the transformative process of urbanization, undernutrition (I), obesity (II) and micronutrient deficiencies (III) are often present at the same time. The simultaneous existence of these three forms of malnutrition constitutes the triple burden of malnutrition.

Due to limited data, the literature hardly examines whether urbanization is an opportunity or a challenge for child health. Most researchers focus on factors linked to urbanization or an urban–rural dichotomy to identify if urbanization matters for nutrition. The body of literature which concentrates on urbanization itself hardly studies health effects over time or on the household level. The project bridges this gap in the literature by investigating the ambiguous effects of urbanization on child nutrition, treating urbanization not as a dichotomy, and examining the nutritional status of adolescents – a neglected but important population group.

India is an interesting case for studying the link between urbanization and nutrition because the triple burden of malnutrition is prevalent. The Indian urbanization splits into an economic–demographic transformation and a political acknowledged administrative one. This project investigates if duration of urbanization and political acknowledgement matter for child health and the dominant form of the triple burden of malnutrition. I use quasi-experimental econometrics, as well as spatial and descriptive statistics to analyze secondary data.

This study clarifies if urbanization benefits child health in India. As it sheds light onto the ambivalent role of urbanization, policy-makers will be able to target public health interventions more effectively.

Liza von Grafenstein received her PhD in Economics at the Research Group ‘GlobalFood’ from Georg-August-University Göttingen, Germany, in 2020. Since then she has worked as a Postdoctoral Researcher at Georg-August-University Göttingen. For her thesis on Determinants of Child Development, she conducted a field experiment and data collection, including a survey of 2,000 households in rural Bihar. She is currently working on issues related to child health, nutrition, and intra-household allocation of resources. Prior to her employment at the University of Göttingen, Liza graduated in Public Administration in International Development from Cornell University and gained experience at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in Bangladesh, India.

Republican Past and Socialist Futures

This project will focus on cultural engagement with India’s history and its reinterpretation in late colonial India by a motley group of Hindi intellectuals who identified themselves as socialists. The research will primarily explore a variety of historical writings across different genres produced between 1930s and 1950s by a number of writer-politician-cultural activists who were part of the shared intellectual-political network and overlapping ideological persuasion. Irrespective of their direct or indirect affiliation to one or multiple political organisations, ranging from the Congress, the Socialist or the Communist, these intellectuals, like other contemporary Indian nationalists, were also invested in excavating, writing and interpreting India’s past. Staying within their self-demarcated ideological boundaries, they managed to enunciate a distinctive cultural agenda. Their larger aim, with its fair share of complexities and limitations, was to reconstruct a shared and common national past vis-a-vis the then prevalent hubris of colonial and Indian historiography of India. Such a history, they appear to have believed, would be an intellectual-political resource. It would not only (re)contextualize and diagnose the problems of the nation’s present – the questions of class, caste, gender and community relation, the forms of political power and representation, but also legitimise their politics and, moreover, enable the foundations for a culturally rooted socialist vision of future. The distinctiveness of these Hindi intellectuals, the project aims to show, was conspicuous in their approaches to history, thematic selection of past events, issues and personalities, generic choices and narrative preferences, language and modes of articulation, and intellectual-moral quest for egalitarian and rationalist indigenous traditions. Foregrounding these aspects, this project will examine how in order to address the problems of political, the intellectual adherents of a self-consciously global or international political ideology in a colonialized country reconstructed and negotiated with the complexities of a national-local histories in the vernacular.

Prabhat Kumar was trained as a historian at the University of Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and South Asia Institute, University of Heidelberg, Germany. He has also taught history at Presidency University, Kolkata. Currently he is assistant professor at Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi.
This project takes the ‘history of religion’ as a field of enquiry in order to think through the career of history as a political category. Different spiritual traditions of the world have immanent to them different modes of remembering – thus Protestant Christianity returns to the original text via philology and exegesis, Islamic jurisprudence uses the Quran and the Hadith as legal precedents, Bhakti and Sufi saintly traditions produce hagiographies, and so on. The history of religion, however, is a modern form of enquiry, which ironically has had no place in the Indian academia. Yet, as the project argues, there was a moment in early- and mid-twentieth century, when the history of religion was debated in the public sphere as well as the academy. In fact, the history of religion emerged as one of the primary modes of political critique – aside of the ways in which nationalism and majoritarianism instrumentalized history of religion as ground for (Hindu and Muslim) identity.

This project takes Ambedkar’s works as its centre point – and contextualizes Ambedkar within a larger field made up by other contemporary scholars like Haraprasad Shastri, Rahul Sankritiyayan, Dharmanand Kosambi etc. – who discussed histories of religion in general and of Buddhism in particular. The project also looks at the interface between contemporary Marxism and history of religion, constructed by not only Ambedkar but also others like Sankritiyayana, Bhupendranath Datt and M. N. Roy. Following from this, the hypothesis at the heart of this project is: Can a history of religion become a mode of political critique in modern times? Are there instances to be found in Indian history, with Ambedkar as a possible exemplar, which vouches for this possibility? And most crucially, what does religion as an object of study entail for history as a discipline? The project also explores how and why Ambedkar himself makes a transition from ethnography to history in course of his career, and indeed from caste to religion, in order to fashion a political critique adequate to his times.

Prathama Banerjee is a political sociologist who researches political candidacy, electioneering and routine politics. Her master’s thesis at Ambedkar University examined the gendered nature of Indian electoral politics and looked at extra-institutional and cultural factors that determine women’s political representation. Her PhD thesis at the University of Cambridge analyzed the local party politics of the BJP in Delhi and captured the aspirations, intentions, and rebellious acts of ordinary party workers coming to terms with the insecurity of forging a successful career in the party (as well as in urban politics) in contemporary Indian politics. My research examines the scramble for party tickets in the competitive world of Indian elections and the race for becoming a party representative in Delhi’s urban politics. The project focuses on the intertwining space of contemporary electoral and party politics where the discrete operations of routine politics and local political economies meet and looks at the growth of the BJP machine at the local level. I interrogate the nature of power and political representation in party politics, and use an inter-disciplinary and ethnographic approach to examine the practical and invisible steps that enable ambitious party members to skillfully negotiate their way to local political offices. The research tries to answer the question: What explains the increasing competition in urban party politics, and what are its supporting institutions and ancillary requirements? And what kind of capital and resources, and political ties are necessary requirements for claiming political power, and how are the routes political actors take for embarking on the same? How gendered is the process and how do women party members negotiate a successful attempt to become the party’s representative in local municipal polls? I also examine the kind of contradictions that have emerged in the BJP around the discourse of political power, and the attendant fears of ideological dilution in the party.

During my time at ICAS:MP, I will analyze this progression of careers in urban municipal politics, and the informal rules and principles of political competition at the local and the state level of party politics in the BJP. The research tries to understand how political representation is a complex and fragile process, and how political actors jostle for a chance at political power through decades of political lobbying at the grassroots of party organisations. It is located at the intersection of debates around the nature of urban corruption, cadre politics and the increasing preoccupation of professional politicians with Indian elections. I am equally concerned with the language of ordinary politicking, and in the uses and presentations of power, charisma and leadership in Indian politics.

Rashmi Singh is a political sociologist who researches political candidacy, electioneering and routine politics. Her master’s thesis at Ambedkar University examined the gendered nature of Indian electoral politics and looked at extra-institutional and cultural factors that determine women’s political representation. Her PhD thesis at the University of Cambridge analyzed the local party politics of the BJP in Delhi and captured the aspirations, intentions, and rebellious acts of ordinary party workers coming to terms with the insecurity of forging a successful career in the party (as well as in urban politics) in contemporary Indian politics.
My project explores the role of caste in making Indian cities, with a focus on Mumbai. I am interested in understanding the relationship between caste and capitalism to study the framing of stigmatized labour. Arriving at a philosophical understanding of stigma as both transcendental and central to urban sanitation, the project undertakes a historical ethnography of the landfill and slaughterhouse as sites that mobilize a distinction between pure and impure bodies. This is done by interlinking spaces, objects and social hierarchies to understand how meanings get attached to certain labour, spaces and materials associated with waste and animal slaughter as ‘disgusting.’ In this sense, I study the materiality of waste and meat, disposal and slaughtering techniques, as well as the bodies of labouring communities as distinctly regenerative of caste as an urban structure. Waste and animal slaughter become an archive to reveal how space is produced through the exercise of power and politics, how epistemic boundaries that define risk and pollution are formed, and how social hierarchies are restated. My aim is three-fold. First, to describe parallel spatial histories of landfill and slaughterhouse as sites produced through the colonial disciplining that govern and classify the senses to create orderly civic space. Second, bringing in perspectives from science and technology studies — that interrogate modern ontologies that split nature from culture, object from subject, and knowledge from value — I argue for stigma as a residual category that frames the design of waste technology and animal slaughtering techniques. Third, to read parallels and different trajectories of forging working-class Dalit and Muslim identities, in which the Dalit identity emerges as politically mainstream, while Muslim identity emerges through the loss of caste as a religious identity that is politically exceptional. Yet both forms of labour, that is, waste-work and animal slaughter, are bound or locked into caste identities, where stigma as the residual frames sanitary infrastructure and sustains the materiality of Mumbai’s sanitary infrastructure.

Shireen Mirza teaches at the Department of Social Science and Humanities, Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology, Delhi. Previously, she taught at the Ambedkar University (Delhi) and at the Indian Institute of Technology, Madras. Her areas of interest include urban anthropology, ecology, religion, waste, anthropocene, climate change, sociology of risk, science, technology & society, stigma and contamination, labour and ritual practices. Her essays have been published in edited volumes and in journals like Economic and Political Weekly, Contributions to Indian Sociology, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society and several others.