



German
Historical
Institute
London

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Conference Report:
Other Histories, Other Pasts

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German Historical Institute London Bulletin
Vol. XLVI, No. 2 (November 2024), 138–44

ISSN 0269-8552

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Other Histories, Other Pasts. International conference organized by and held at ICAS:MP, New Delhi, on 4–6 December 2023. Conveners: Indra Sengupta (GHIL) and Neeladri Bhattacharya (Ashoka University).

How do we understand popular historical consciousness and the ways in which it constitutes political subjectivities? To grasp this, we need to move beyond academic history writing, the limitations of which in shaping wider political movements have become manifestly clear in recent times. In order to better understand the often mutually constitutive relationship between the production and practice of history and the larger world of the political, we need to track the processes that go into the making of notions of the past beyond the realm of academic history. This also means a shift away from the nation state-centred approach that has traditionally been associated with the growth in influence of the discipline as we know it since its modern, nineteenth-century appearance. It means looking at the framing of historical narratives and their political uses for the assertion of multiple identities which may not have engaged with the nation state or, if they did, did so in various, intricate ways that defy the framework of national or larger regional narratives of the past. To unpack these complicated framings of the past and grasp the way they shape political action, we need to look at the production, circulation, and consumption of historical narratives on smaller, local levels and at sites where the nation, the region, and other larger entities were reconfigured in ways specific to a place. This is the research agenda of ‘Selling Histories’, a sub-project of the ‘History as a Political Category’ research area of ICAS:MP, a 12-year Indo-German and international research project funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research and based in New Delhi, of which the German Historical Institute London is a

partner. The conference was the final one of the sub-project during ICAS:MP's main funding phase.

The conference was designed to explore research questions that were framed in relation to the popular historical tracts and tourist guides with small, localized circulation that had been collected from various sites in India as part of the 'Selling Histories' project. It thus focused on the world of what are generally called 'popular' histories that circulate in the public sphere outside the domain of academic history, and examined the ways in which such histories represent historical consciousness and political assertion. The objective of the conference was to explore how such narratives work, and the ways in which they are mediated by and constitute the political. The focus was mainly on India, but transnational comparative perspectives were included. The conference consisted of five thematic sessions, including a section based on the collection of sources assembled since 2018 under the ICAS:MP sub-project 'Selling Histories': 1) History and the Public; 2) Writing the Community; 3) Histories and Archives in the Digital Age; 4) Writing Caste; and 5) Collecting Popular Histories: A Panel.

Neeladri Bhattacharya introduced the intellectual agenda of the conference by unpacking some of its conceptual categories and highlighting some of the problems associated with history outside the academy. Focusing on the term 'other' in the title of the conference, he addressed some of the conceptual and methodological issues that arise when dealing with such 'imaginings of the past', the politics of such narratives, and the role of these narratives in mediating the public sphere or what he described as the 'public life of history'. In such conceptions of the past, he argued, the very idea of history, as historians (experts) practise it, is open to question. This point would be picked up by several of the papers that followed, which engaged with the question of audiences and consumers of such histories, the visions of the past that the narratives contained, and the strategies of narration that were employed. In particular, Bhattacharya focused on the term 'popular histories', which is commonly used to describe such narratives of the past. He emphasized the need to sharpen the definition of the terms and categories we use to analyse such narratives, drawing the lines between categories such as 'popular', 'other', 'local', and 'vernacular', which several papers would expand on. He

underlined the distinction between popular and populist histories, and what are often described as histories of ‘the people’. What is the relationship between such narratives and academic histories of subjugation? How do these narratives challenge, even subvert, the protocols of academic historiography? What protocols of archiving apply to these histories? Who is the expert? What remains of the role of the academic historian as an expert? How are these histories entangled with official or academic ones? How can one grasp the entanglements between such popular histories and elite history writing? These were some of the questions that were flagged for discussion.

The first panel on ‘History and the Public’ (Chair: Berber Bevernage, Ghent University) went straight to the heart of the questions set out in the introductory remarks. Aparna Vaidik (Ashoka University) spoke on ‘The Practice of Public History’, focusing on ethics. She drew on her experience as a practitioner working closely with communities in India to question the intellectual authority of the historian, the official archive, the ethics of archiving, and the evidence-centric practice of academic history. In a provocative plea to historians to rethink their position as experts, Vaidik urged the decentring of the role of the specialist in producing history, emphasized the role of history and historians in building solidarities with the communities whose histories we write, and called for historians to focus on the *process of producing* history rather than the *product*, describing the practice of public history as a ‘moral act’. In his paper on ‘Histories at Risk’, Jerome de Groot (University of Manchester) addressed similar issues. Basing his presentation on the work of the AHRC-funded Histories at Risk Network, de Groot spoke on public history both in the national context of Britain (especially in current debates on history and heritage) and on a global scale, and, like Vaidik, he drew attention to the role of the historian as an activist. In the final paper of the section, titled ‘Birth of A Genre: The Local in Amateur Bengali Historical Writings and Identity Formation among Modern Bengali Hindus’, Tanika Sarkar (Ashoka University) spoke about the writing of local histories in colonial provincial Bengal and the emergence in peripheral regions of a vernacular modernity, a sense of place, and a localized public sphere in the nineteenth century. These histories, she argued, were

distinct from the national histories written in Bengali that were prominent at the time.

The session on 'Writing the Community' (Chair: Andreas Gestrich, formerly Trier University) further developed the themes introduced in the previous section in relation to the formation of community identities (often geographically defined), their political claims, and the historical narratives that supported such claims. The two papers 'Narrating the German *Heimat* after 1945: Vernacular Histories in a Post-Fascist Democracy' (Martina Steber, Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History, Munich, and University of Augsburg) and 'Community History as Critique: Muslim Peshawar *Biradaris* and the Politics of Contestation in Colonial India' (Soheb Niazi, International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden) engaged with the writing of non-professional, vernacular histories that were fundamentally linked to the formation and politicization of communities. In her presentation, Steber dwelt on the genre of *Heimatbücher* that was widely popularized in Germany, and especially in Bavaria, until the end of the twentieth century. In these books, the idea of the *Heimat* (homeland) and a selective focus on historical events were used to construct the idea of a harmonious community with a continuous history that by and large glossed over the tumultuous events of the twentieth century. Soheb Niazi analysed local, community histories (*tarikhs*) produced by upwardly mobile, but non-elite, Muslim groups in colonial North India and argued that these were essentially a contestation of traditional Muslim elites and their historical claims to higher social status. In his paper 'Tracts of the Gita Press and the Making of Hindu Nationalism: *Adarsh Nari* and the Ideal Male Child', Akshaya Mukul (independent, Delhi) explored the world of the Gita Press, which produced tracts seeking to shape the moral world of Hindu women in North India from the 1920s onwards.

The two papers in the session on 'Histories and Archives in the Digital Age' (Chair: Ravi Vasudevan, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, Delhi) reflected the growing importance of new media and non-official archives in the production and circulation of history today. In her paper 'Archival Traffic: Crowdsourcing History in South Asia', Mallika Leuzinger (GHIL) analysed the citizen memory projects that have witnessed a remarkable surge in the age of the internet and social media. The problems associated with the official archive in South

Asia resulted in a boom in crowdsourced history and the rise of the citizen historian. This itself was not unproblematic, she argued, especially in view of the involvement of large corporations in such projects and the capitalist mode of financing that underpinned such ostensibly citizen-driven enterprises. Ronie Parciak's (Tel Aviv University) paper 'New Oral Traditions: Historical Narratives in the Digital Age' dwelt on Sufi visual narratives of the history of Sufism in India and showed that such forms of historical production were intimately linked to the political situation today. She argued that these representations indicate attempts by the Sufi community to negotiate their closeness to political power, on the one hand by assimilating Hindu styles and symbols to indicate the Indianness of Sufism, and on the other by referencing the sacred geography of Islam outside India.

The session on 'Writing Caste' (Chair: Indra Sengupta) focused on the self-produced histories of particular caste groups that reflect their significant use of caste-based claims to history and thereby to political recognition. Deepasri Baul (Asian University for Women, Chattogram) in her paper 'An Aversion to Progress: The Cultural Habitus of North Indian Caste Histories' and Neeladri Bhattacharya in his presentation on 'Recovering the Lost Self: Brahman Histories and the Politics of Hegemony' focused on upper-caste/Brahman anxieties surrounding a perceived lost status in present histories, and consequent attempts to restore honour by invoking the past to make truth claims. Both presenters emphasized the long tradition of such truth claims, which can be traced back to the late nineteenth century and the early stages of anticolonial nationalism in India. Baul spoke of attempts to present the vision of a harmonious nation untroubled by social conflict, as opposed to the problem-oriented historical analyses of professional historians, which these upper-caste writings often tend to dismiss as divisive. This kind of history, she argued, resonates with the corporate-produced self-help books on self-esteem and positive thinking that are present in the book market in India today. Neeladri Bhattacharya highlighted the importance of the internet, digital media, and technology in circulating images of male Hindu historical figures. These, he argued, were recast through the use of digital technology as the embodiment of virility in an attempt to reclaim for Brahmans their perceived loss of honour in the present. He focused

in particular on Brahman and upper-caste non-professional historians and writers in the Indian diaspora in the West who are actively engaged in producing such historical representations both within the diaspora community and in India. In her paper 'Another History? Dalit Dissent and the Genre of *Anchalik Itihas* and Archaeology in Coastal Bengal', Neha Chatterji (Manipal Academy of Higher Education) demonstrated the link between caste histories and claims to regional identity and political assertion by focusing on histories produced by lower-caste groups in the Sundarbans, a region perceived as being on the margins of Bengal. She highlighted the ways in which local, lower-caste, Dalit writers made demands for recognition of the particularity of their region and its culture by producing historical narratives that used archaeological discoveries to lay claim to historical antiquity.

The conference ended with a final session on 'Collecting Popular Histories: A Panel' that presented research conducted by the early-career scholars associated with the 'Selling Histories' sub-project. The research was based largely on the source collection of the same name that had been assembled in a period of around seven years by a team of early-career scholars led by Neeladri Bhattacharya and Indra Sengupta. The collection consists of around 1,400 texts in five Indian languages, including English – mostly tracts and pamphlets produced cheaply by local presses, enjoying limited circulation, and written by authors of no particular distinction. The collection was presented by Neeladri Bhattacharya and Indra Sengupta. Deepasri Baul, Soheb Niazi, Ufaque Paiker (ICAS:MP), and Paulami Guha Biswas (Panchla Mahavidyalaya, Howrah) presented their early research findings. The presentations were followed by comments by Ravikant (CSDS, Delhi), Martina Steber, and Aparna Vaidik. The discussion raised questions about the usefulness of such a collection and debated whether it can be described as an archive, since in many ways it does not conform to the protocols of modern day archiving as established by institutions rooted in the Western academy. It also returned to the research agenda of the conference by engaging with questions such as: what constitutes an archive? What is the role of state power as reflected in archival holdings? How can one distinguish between 'popular' and academic history? What is the role of place and the 'local' in the

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production and circulation of these texts? What notion of the public is implicit in such collection drives? What is popular history, and what remains, or should remain, of the authority of the professional historian and of academic history? What is, or should be, the wider, public culture of history? A final summing-up of the conference was then presented by Shail Mayaram (CSDS), Berber Bevernage, and Andreas Gestrich.

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