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## Editorial

In the last issue, we promised to explore questions of democracy and popular sovereignty in greater detail. By the time this issue comes along, these are right there in front of everyone once more. While the US Presidential election juggernaut, version 2008, rolls on, we turn our gaze to societies and polities outside or on the fringes of the North, though not outside its gaze.

The storm in Tibet seems to have subsided. Or perhaps, with the Olympics over, the storm around it has, and the iron curtain has again *slipped* firmly into place. But the media, as always, does not lack in crisis. There's Georgia. And as a tiny country groans under the pressure of a 'Born Again' (refer to Edward Said's last article) Superpower, the enemies of *the* Empire are placed in a neat little quandary: Whether to share in the anguish or celebrate the end of unipolarity. And then there is Thailand. The crisis there refuses to die down, and again it seems to be a choice between popular sovereignty, as represented by an aggressive, internally oppressive regime and a secular, soft, but unpopular, if not undemocratic one.

And, of course, Africa seems to confound Northern gazes ever more. The moment the Zimbabwean crisis seems to be over, there is another jolt. The man, Bush called his pointman in the region and erstwhile hero of the liberation struggle, Mbeki has been forced to resign amidst allegations that would remind many of Watergate.

Democracy and modernity, civil and political society, history and past (colonial or otherwise)– lines blur and forever refuse to be straightjacketed. But then, did the Owl of Minerva ever promise otherwise?

This issue of *Global South*, too, puts forward, as we promised in the last editorial, certain reflections of/ on some of these issues. Dan Tschirgi, in an exploration of an 'Islamic' movement in Egypt, explodes the portrayal of such movements as irredeemably caught in the bind of tradition. Yılmaz Çolak takes off in a similar vein through his exploration of the issue of the Turkish head-scarf, and again pits the contrast between popular democracy and secular modernity. Through these two articles is the running thread of questioning notions that seem axiomatic in much of western modernist discourses. Baisakhi Bandyopadhyay deals with another issue of the greatest importance to the contemporary world and the South– that of conservation. Instead of the Northern notions of 'scientific' environmentalism, she focuses on two southern experiences of indigenous biodiversity protection in India and China.

In *Across the South*, we present two conference reports– Martin Aranguren writing on the annual Cultural Studies Workshop, which was held in February, 2008 in Pune, India. Alejandra Galindo Marines presents a report on "Reconfiguring the Spaces of Citizenship: Women and Gender" held in Mexico City. Marines also writes a captivating piece on her experience in Saudi Arabia, while doing her field research. Nilanjana Bhattacharya's account of her one year long stay in El Colegio de Mexico is the stuff of what, in a way, SEPHIS is all about, as she writes about how truly South-South interaction became possible during this sojourn in what *was* an alien land, made possible by a grant by our parent organisation.

Samita Sen reviews a fascinating study of the agency recruiting of IT professionals from India who are thus distributed throughout the globe. A few who are familiar with the subject would be struck by the similarities with the recruitment for Assam tea garden labour or indeed of indentured labour in colonial times. We also present, for our readers, a mixed bag of short book notices, hoping to draw their attention to some of the variety of scholarly work being done across the Global South.

Hope you enjoy these readings.

## Call for Contributions

### Sephis e-magazine

#### Special issue on 'Globalisation and its Impact'

January 2009

We are inviting essays on globalisation and its impact on all the south countries. We are hoping to cover a wide range of issues such as the history of globalisation, its specific manifestations in the context of south countries, its impact including the varied responses- political, social, cultural- to multiple processes of globalisation in different southern regions. Contributions can be in the form of an article (roughly about 3000 words). We also welcome contributions in the form of Book reviews, Reports of contemporary trends or events, Reports of conferences or meetings (1000-1500 words). We specially welcome historiographical essays from different south contexts.

**Deadline for submission: 15 November 2008**

## Articles

## Culture as an Element in Violent Reactions to Economic Development: An Historical View of Upper Egypt and the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya*<sup>1</sup>



Dan Tschirgi

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### Abstract

This article explores the history of the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya's* conflict with the Government of Egypt in the 1990s, as the GoE was steadily pursuing neo-liberal developmental policies.

### Introduction

Neo-liberalism, although rooted in economic theory and aiming at economic objectives, invariably has political as well as socio-cultural implications. The central issue is one of interactive influence: How do neo-liberal economic departures affect different types of political systems and socio-cultural settings, and, in turn, how do the latter affect the application and results of neo-liberal economic policies in practice?

It is obvious that the interaction between culture and neo-liberal economic policies cannot be ignored if the dynamics of economic development are to be understood. Yet, as frequently noted, culture is one of the most elusive concepts "when it comes to precise definition."<sup>2</sup>

The view of culture utilised a few years ago by a symposium held in Shanghai, China that focused on economic development and grassroots social movements provides an analytical tool that is useful here: Culture is taken to be "the totality of various movements and elements which evolve social solidarity, independent of... national policies...."<sup>3</sup> In this sense, our concern is with the interaction between economic development in practice and cultural elements that foster social solidarity at the grassroots level.

Two major reasons commend this focus. First, a concentration on the grassroots level is necessary if any credible analytical link is to be

maintained between culture and economic development. Second, a grassroots focus does much to avoid the distorting impact of mythologies of monolithic "national" or "ethnic" cultures.

In unfolding its analysis, this article will also be informed by the concept of "economic culture" as used by Heiko Schuss, a scholar at the University of Bochum, Germany. Schuss notes that "the transformation of many national economies toward market-economy does not only involve formal institutional changes." He points out that "new constitutions and laws meet with resistance and are distorted in practice." The question, he adds, is "whether this resistance also has cultural causes."<sup>4</sup>

Schuss defines "economic culture" in cognitive terms: "the mental factors concerning the allocation and distribution of scarce goods."<sup>5</sup> I believe the value of this approach to economic culture is twofold. First, by narrowing the conceptualisation of culture to the cognitive, it reduces the range of potential interpretative difficulties. Second, as the focus on "mental factors concerning the allocation of scarce goods" necessarily includes "opinions, attitudes, values and cognitive models of societies,"<sup>6</sup> the link between economic culture and "political behavior" (that is, behavior aimed at affecting the use and distribution of power within a given society) is patent. In short, Schuss' definition offers a useful guide for exploring the roots of political behaviour generated by steps toward

- 1 Portions of this article have been adapted from Dan Tschirgi, *Turning Point: The Arab World's Marginalization After 9/11*, Praeger Security International, Westport, Cape Town and London, 2007.
- 2 Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "Political Culture and Development in Modern Egypt", in Dan Tschirgi, (ed.), *Development in the Age of Liberalization*, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 1996, p. 247.
- 3 Project proposal submitted by the Department of Political Science, American University in Cairo to the Ford Foundation, April 1999.
- 4 Heiko Schuss, "The Relevance of Economic Culture for Middle East Studies", *Unpublished paper delivered at the European Association for Middle East Studies Tri-Annual Conference*, The University of Ghent, September, 1999, p. 1.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.

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economic development.

The global turn to neo-liberal development strategies has long been a source of concern to observers who foresaw the possibility that social upheaval and violence would be a by-product of neo-liberal efforts. Two decades ago David Apter worried that development in the modern age would find no place for certain groups and described the plight of the "marginalized" as follows:

Marginalization... is a condition resulting from prolonged functional superfluosity.

[Marginals] are deprived of virtually all the roles of which functioning society is composed....<sup>7</sup>

The prospect, of course, was that marginals would not fade quietly into the dusk of history but rather burst forth in a discourse of violence.

Does neo-liberal economic development necessarily entail violent reactions in all contexts? Apter does not really imply this, but others do. The problem with such assertions is that they beg the questions of how and why neo-liberal measures may generate conflicts and ignore the fact that neo-liberal policies do not invariably lead to social violence. The real problem is to identify the circumstances and dynamics that may lead to such an outcome.

### The *Gama'a al-Islamiyya*

The *Gama'a al-Islamiyya* developed as a movement in Upper Egypt during the early 1970s. The group's primary goal was to bring about the establishment of an Islamic state under the *Shari'a*. The *Gama'a* charged Egypt's existing political system and leaders with being religiously, morally and politically corrupt and with violating true Islamic and Egyptian values.

In the early 1990s, the *Gama'a* embarked on a sustained campaign of violence that made it the most prominent of Egypt's militant Islamic groups. Working through networks established over the years in poor neighborhoods of Cairo and other cities, the *Gama'a* was able to project its struggle, largely by terrorism, throughout much of the country. However, its focal point was Upper Egypt.

The Egyptian government adopted and maintained a hardline approach to the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya*, rejecting any possibility of negotiations. Instead, it relied on heavy security measures, including massive arrests, the death penalty, and the use of military courts to try

suspected militants.

By 1996, Egypt's government had clearly gained the upper hand. Militant attacks were in decline, though not ended, and this was paralleled by an increase in international tourism. Despite sporadic clashes in Upper Egypt, some *Gama'a* leaders suggested a cease-fire in the spring of 1996, a call that was repeated a year later when six major *Gama'a* figures proclaimed a "halt [to] military operations...."<sup>8</sup> These initiatives, which were rejected by the government, seemed to reveal a growing division in *Gama'a* ranks. This was tragically confirmed in November, 1997 when members of the organisation slaughtered fifty-eight foreign tourists in Luxor.

The ferocity of the Luxor massacre brought the *Gama'a* to its lowest ebb. All indications showed that the overwhelming majority of Egyptians were outraged both by the carnage and its perpetration in the name of Islam. The split in the *Gama'a* was glaring, with its main leadership apparently united in condemning the attack as a "violation" that proved "more damaging to the *Gama'a* than for the Egyptian government."<sup>9</sup> Although the government continued to arrest, try and sometimes execute *Gama'a* members in 1998, by the following year only a few relatively minor armed clashes occurred. For the time being, at least, it appeared that the *Gama'a* was cowed.

### The Upper Egyptian Subculture

Upper Egypt comprises the country's eight southernmost governorates. The region's history is one of isolated removal from the centres of national life. The local relationships resulting from this centuries-old condition gave Upper Egypt an identity of its own, yet— it is important to note— this has not precluded Upper Egyptians from also identifying with the modern Egyptian state. Nonetheless, Southerners are aware that they are stereotyped negatively in the rest of the country, widely held to be crude, prone to violence and lacking intelligence.

Alongside the even more ancient presence of Copts, tribal groupings dating from the Arab conquest combined to form a hierarchical order that placed two groups, the *ashraf* and the *arab*, in dominating positions. These were followed by lesser tribes, with the *fellah* at the bottom of the social scale.<sup>10</sup> Personal loyalties are focused on the family and tribe.

7 David E. Apter, *Rethinking Development: Modernization, Dependency and Postmodern Politics*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, California, 1987, pp. 316-17.

8 "Disgruntled Militant Lawyer Stands Down," *Middle East Times*, 25 January 1998, p. 1.

9 Richard Engle, "Militants Condemn Luxor Bloodbath," *Middle East Times*, 7 December 1997, p. 1.

10 Mamoun Fandy, "Egypt's Islamic Group: Regional Revenge?" *Middle East Journal*, 48, 4, Autumn, 1994, pp. 607-25.



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The central government's authority in Upper Egypt has traditionally been cemented through patron-client links with leading families of the *ashraf* and *arab* groups. Even the Nasserist regime did not substantially undermine this political-administrative arrangement. Cairo continued to staff the higher ranks of the local police and security apparatus with personnel from the *ashraf* and *arabs*.<sup>11</sup>

Religion has been central to Egyptian society. In Upper Egypt, the *ashraf* claim direct descent from the Prophet, while the *arabs* trace their lineage to a group of tribes from Arabia. On the other hand, the status of the *fellahin* has rested on the general belief that they descended from members of Egypt's pre-Islamic community who converted to Islam, a history that placed them inescapably beneath both the *ashraf* and *arabs*.<sup>12</sup> Copts have occupied an ambivalent position in the social scale; as Christians they are considered inferior to Muslims but their individual status effectively depends on more material criteria.

Religious practices in Upper Egyptian Muslim and Christian communities, particularly at the lower socio-economic levels, are strongly imbued with non-orthodox folk elements, some of pharaonic origin. Although orthodox Islam is well grounded in urban areas, the countryside is the domain of a rich folk-religion, replete with beliefs in the magical, miraculous and occult.<sup>13</sup>

Despite rich agricultural resources, Upper Egypt has long been, and continues to be, the country's poorest region. By 2002, Upper Egypt was home to some forty percent of Egypt's population but contained some seventy percent of the country's poor.<sup>14</sup>

The region has witnessed significant changes in the past five decades. The populist Nasserist years not only raised hopes for general improvement and a more equitable distribution of wealth but also produced concrete achievements. Land reform, though not as sweeping as promised, brought some benefit to the *fellahin*. Moreover, the opening of free universities in the 1960s seemed to promise an escape from poverty and the limitations of a rigidly traditional social hierarchy. With the government committed to employ all university graduates, the national bureaucracy provided a livelihood as well as a degree of prestige for sons of peasants who—under the pressure of increasing land scarcity—had no prospect of acquiring land of their own.

In broad terms, then, among the main elements comprising the modern Upper Egyptian sub-culture are the following:

- A sense of regional identity fostered by historical isolation from the centres of the Egyptian polity.
- A sense of identity with the Egyptian polity.
- A shared sense of being looked upon as inferior by the wider Egyptian society.
- A sense of social order marked by a rigid hierarchical regional social structure, at the bottom of which are the *fellahin*.
- A strong sense of extended familial and tribal loyalty that includes adherence to blood-feud.
- A sense of political order based on patron-client relations between central authorities and the upper strata of local society.
- A strong religious orientation, predominantly Islamic, that is heavily imbued with folk-religion in which the miraculous figures prominently.

The rise of the *Gama'a* was tightly linked to changes in some of these sub-cultural pillars that in large part were generated in the first instance by economic factors.

### **Neo-Liberal Economics, Culture, and the Rise of the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya***

If we take Schuss' cognitive approach to economic culture, it quickly becomes evident that neither religion nor the weight of traditional social hierarchy resulted in economic passivity among Upper Egyptians. Indeed, the population, unquestionably including those at the lower end of the social spectrum, demonstrated that "mental factors concerning the allocation and distribution of scarce goods" could, and did, cause changes in established behaviour. It is possible to go even further and claim that the dynamic interplay between cognition and action helped change existing sub-cultural pillars. Such, for example, was essentially what occurred with the rise to prominence at the grassroots level of the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya's* activist, militant, anti-status quo brand of Islamic fundamentalism.

Evidence for these assertions is found in the history of Upper Egypt after Gamal Abdel Nasser's Free officers overthrew the monarchy.

The dominant Upper Egyptian reaction to the

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 615.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 613.

<sup>13</sup> See Winifred S. Blackman, *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt*, Frank Cass & Co., London, 1968, pp. 183-200.

<sup>14</sup> Tschirgi, *Turning Point*, p. 99.

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promise of land reform, the eagerness of their response to the introduction of modern higher education at the regional level and to opportunities of employment in government service, and their massive participation in labour migration all stand as refutations to any notion that the economic culture of Upper Egypt was mired in stagnant traditionalism.

However, the 1970s and 1980s would see conditions in Upper Egypt begin to be affected more directly by world market forces as the Egyptian government initiated the country's turn to neo-liberal development policies. For the lower strata of Upper Egyptian society, particularly the *fellahin*, the result was that expectations of economic and social betterment were increasingly threatened by the mutually reinforcing effects of official government policies and the self-interest of traditional regional elites.

The limitations of Nasser's state-centric economic policies were soon manifested. By the early 1970s, the country's bloated bureaucracy was rapidly becoming incapable of providing employment to the burgeoning numbers of Upper Egyptians who poured into the regional universities. Even when placements were available, *fellahin* graduates discovered that university credentials were frequently unable to overcome Upper Egyptian class bias.<sup>15</sup>

Other developments in the 1970s placed Upper Egypt's *fellahin* under increasing pressures. Anwar Sadat's reorientation of Egypt's economy through the liberalizing measures of *infitah* led him to seek the support of traditional rural elites. The renewed ascendancy of the landed notables menaced the *fellahin's* gains and aspirations. In the same decade, large numbers of *fellahin* who benefited from the oil boom by finding temporary employment in Arab Gulf states returned home with relatively significant capital, only to find the path to upward mobility still blocked by the traditional local power structure.<sup>16</sup>

Some, imbued by their experiences in Saudi Arabia with a more uncompromising and egalitarian vision of Islam, reacted to their mounting frustrations with greater religiosity. In Upper Egypt and among communities of southerners in urban centres throughout the country, returned *fellah* workers funded mosques in which an activist, socially conscious interpretation of

Islam challenged the status quo religious vision of the *ashraf* and *arabs*. The influx of villagers into Egyptian cities and towns, which by the 1970s led increasingly to the "ruralisation" of these centres, provided fertile fields for fundamentalist, and militant, movements. Urban mosques often became centres for the recruitment of rural migrants into militant organisations.<sup>17</sup>

The *Gama'a al-Islamiyya* first developed as a movement, among students at Assiut University in the early 1970s. Mamoun Fandy, "one of the first generation of peasant farmers' sons to benefit from Nasser's educational reforms" and an Assiut University classmate of many of the *Gama'a's* founders, recounts that the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya* was marked from its inception by a distinctly Upper Egyptian *fellah* character which distinguished it from other militant Islamic groups.<sup>18</sup> While the *Gama'a* held the Cairo regime responsible for betraying Egypt's Islamic values and saw the solution as an Islamic state under Shari'a, it was also determined to alter power relationships in the south. In short, it aimed its fight "against southern tribal dominance... (and) the Cairo government's role in this conflict..."<sup>19</sup>

Fandy's recollection of the *Gama'a's* origins as rooted in a distinctly *fellahin* ethos is borne out by studies conducted after the organisation gained prominence in the 1990s as Egypt's main militant Islamic group. Commenting on what he termed "the changing face of Islamic militants," Saad Eddin Ibrahim indicates that in comparison to militants studied in the early 1980s, those of the 1990s proved to be "younger and less educated... (many coming) from rural, small town and shantytown backgrounds."<sup>20</sup> Ibrahim referred to a change that actually reflected only the *Gama'a's* rise to preeminence among other Islamic militants rather than any change in the composition of the group itself.

During the decade after Sadat's assassination the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya* was relatively quiescent. The same period was marked by the Mubarak regime's pursuit of Sadat's neo-liberal policies through steps that included reducing consumer and agricultural subsidies and decontrolling prices. The burden of poverty increased throughout the country. However, Upper Egypt remained— as always— the poorest region. Ultra-

15 Mamoun Fandy, "The Tensions Behind the Violence in Egypt", *Middle East Policy*, 2, 1, 1993, pp. 27-28.

16 Fandy, "Regional Revenge?", pp. 616-18.

17 Uri M. Kupferschmidt, "Reformist and Militant Islam in Urban and Rural Egypt," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 23, October 1987, p. 409.

18 Fandy, "Egypt's Islamic Group," p. 613.

19 Ibid.

20 Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "The Changing Face of Egypt's Islamic Activism", in Saad Eddin Ibrahim, *Egypt, Islam and Democracy*, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 1996, p. 73.

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poverty was particularly high in Assiut and rural Upper Egypt continued to be the country's poorest agricultural area.<sup>21</sup>

Additional regional misery was inflicted by circumstances that arose far beyond Egypt's borders. The 1986 downturn of Middle East oil economies sharply reduced possibilities for migrant labour.<sup>22</sup> Then the 1990-91 Gulf Crisis produced a massive return of Egyptian workers as well as deep uncertainties regarding the future of the Gulf labour market.

However, the worst fears of peasants seemed confirmed in 1992, when the government enacted a measure that effectively repealed statutes governing tenancy. Known by opponents as "the law for throwing out tenants from their land," this step profoundly disturbed what the rural poor considered "an important basis of a moral and political order."<sup>23</sup>

The *Gama'a's* major assault on the government developed in early 1990s. No single event marked its beginning, but by mid-1992 there was no doubt that Egypt's government was facing a sustained offensive. Press accounts of the developing struggle revealed the extent to which the group had won grassroots support in the rural countryside.<sup>24</sup>

The following years were tumultuous in Upper Egypt. Although the total number of *Gama'a* fighters almost certainly never exceeded a few thousand individuals, the government's massive security operations long remained ineffective. Aware that family and tribal ties allowed *Gama'a* militants to count on the support of much of the population, government forces attempted to isolate the fighters through a variety of techniques, which included the arrest and sometimes killing of militants' relatives.<sup>25</sup> Given the prominence of the blood-feud in the Upper Egyptian sub-culture, such measures inevitably affected the nature of the violence that plagued the region. It was not long before many of the *Gama'a's* terrorist attacks were perpetrated more for purposes of revenge than for political motives.

In the end, the government's iron-fist approach proved effective. As noted above, by 1996 the *Gama'a's* militant capabilities were clearly ebbing and its own leadership was torn over whether to sustain the violent campaign or abandon it. However, the challenge posed to

the *Gama'a* by the government's superior force does not fully explain the group's retreat from terrorism. Equally, if not more, important was the broader Egyptian public's declining sympathy for the movement.

Reliable public opinion polls are not available to the researcher who focuses on Egypt. Nonetheless, available evidence indicates that in the early 1990s a significant portion of the Egyptian public sympathised with the goals of the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya*, though not so much with its reliance on violence to achieve them.<sup>26</sup> By the mid-1990s, however, the group's terrorist campaign had caused most public sympathy to evaporate. What little remained was swept away in the general outraged reaction to the 1997 Luxor Massacre.

From the start, and from deeply cultural roots, the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya* was characterised by both a regional and national ethos. Upper Egypt's sub-culture incorporates both regional and national identities. Thus, the *Gama'a* perceived itself as fighting on behalf of Egypt's true values. Definitive signs that its chosen path had alienated the bulk of Egyptian society lay at the heart of the *Gama'a's* eclipse.

### **Economic Development, Grassroots Solidarity and Violence**

To refer to the society of Upper Egypt as "marginalised" is simply to encapsulate in a term a historical and socio-economic reality. On the one hand, distance and geography historically isolated the region from contact with neighbouring areas. On the other hand, endemic poverty and underdevelopment, as well as being perceived negatively by their compatriots, have long been the lot of most Upper Egyptians. At the bottom of the regional hierarchy are the *fellahin*, the most marginalised of the marginalised.

To refer to the society of Upper Egypt as "traditional," however, is to enter a realm where terminology must be used with extreme caution. If by "traditional" is meant that certain historically derived customs and manners remain valued, the label is accurate. If the term is intended to signify a stagnant resistance to change, it is badly misused. This only applies to the lowest levels of Upper Egyptian society.

The above account has shown that from the

21 Ibid., pp. 17-18.

22 Dan Tschirgi, "Egyptian Labor Migration: Social, Political and Economic Effects", in Mohammed Shtayyeh (ed.), *Labor Migration: Palestine, Jordan, Egypt and Israel*, Palestinian Center for Regional Studies, Jerusalem, 1997, p. 53.

23 Reem Saad, "State, Landlord, Parliament and Peasant: The Story of the 1992 Tenancy Law in Egypt," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 96, pp. 387-89.

24 See "Upper Egypt: the Battle Against the Leagues", *The Economist*, 4 July 1992, p. 38.

25 Confidential source.

26 Jeongmin Seo, "Government Response to Radical Islamic Movements in Egypt", Unpublished Thesis, The American University in Cairo, 1996, pp. 61-62.

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days of the Nasserist Revolution the mass of Upper Egyptians actively hoped for and sought economic development. The dominant economic culture of the marginalised *fellahin* valued upward mobility that would alter their place in the prevailing "allocation and distribution of scarce goods." The prospect of change, in this sense, was more than welcomed.

However, it has also shown that by the early 1970s rising expectations engendered by incipient economic opportunities were increasingly frustrated. The negative impact of limitations inherent in Nasser's command economy was followed by Anwar Sadat's turn to neo-liberalism. At the local level, the most marginalised elements of society not only saw the promises of the revolution evaporate but also, as neo-liberalism increasingly promoted a market economy, the rollback of gains already attained.

Conditions beyond Egypt's borders were also a factor affecting Upper Egypt. In the 1970s, the oil-rich Arab states provided an outlet for Upper Egyptians' search for upward mobility. However, revenues earned abroad often failed to translate into the fulfilment of hopes at home. The rigid traditional social hierarchy of Upper Egypt frequently helped frustrate the ambitions of lower class migrant workers. The downturn of the oil states' economies in the mid-1980s and the 1990-91 Gulf Crisis curtailed the labour market and increased Upper Egypt's economic difficulties.

This catalogue of frustrated expectations explains the rise of the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya*. It also explains why the *Gama'a's* orientation was not "traditional" or atavistic but rather revolutionary, in the sense of seeking basic change in dominant power structure. This is most clearly seen in the group's interpretation of Islam.

That religion played a central role in the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya's* birth was fully in keeping with Islam's significance in the sub-culture of Upper Egypt. What was not in keeping with the traditional, was the *Gama'a's* activist, socially-conscious, egalitarian interpretation of Islam. This change in a sub-cultural pillar can be traced to the impact of economic development as it affected the lowest stratum of Upper Egyptian society.

It is not difficult to see why this activist Islamic interpretation appealed at a cognitive level to many. One need only reflect upon the rise and fall of the Upper Egyptian *fellah's* hopes over the past few decades. Under Nasser, change was both welcomed and eagerly anticipated. Things were different in the ensuing years. Change, much of it emanating from sources far beyond the control or, in most

cases, the understanding, of the marginalised appeared to have become not only threatening but almost overwhelming in its intensity, variety and malignity.

The unfolding of this perspective provided fertile ground for activist mobilisers who held state authorities responsible for the plight of the marginalised. Both in Upper Egypt and in *Gama'a*-dominated mosques throughout the country these mobilisers injected a new emphasis on social justice into prevailing religious belief systems, and linked the new interpretation to "true" national values. The essential contribution, and attraction, of the mobiliser's message was that it offered, to those who accepted it, a credible promise of both change and resistance to change. This explains the emphasis the *Gama'a* gave to demands for socio-economic change for the better and the preservation of cultural integrity.

If this understanding of the allure of the *Gama'a's* militant, activist interpretation of Islam is correct, it still only partly explains the movement's ability to win widespread support in Upper Egypt. Why did so many Upper Egyptians provide low-level, or tacit, support to the *Gama'a*, while others, a more committed minority, threw themselves fully into the fray, often at the predictable cost of their lives? As to the former, in addition to the force of the *Gama'a's* religious message, the answer appears to be found in non-religious sub-cultural elements. The sense of regional identity, the impact of familial and tribal loyalties, and the sense of being looked down on by both regional elites and the wider Egyptian public must all have contributed to the non-militant grassroots support enjoyed by the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya*.

But what of the fighters who spearheaded the *Gama'a's* terrorist campaign? Put another way, what caused these relatively small numbers of mainly lower-stratum Upper Egyptians to believe they could force desired change despite the full military resources available to governing authorities? Here, with death being a very real possibility— if not probable— consequence, the answer may well largely hinge on the nature of the religious element in the Upper Egyptian sub-culture.

This is not to deny that the full answer is probably complex and may well have included an intensity of frustration, anger and desperation that galvanised some to conclude that the effort had to be made, if only as a futile, but satisfying, expression of outrage. But this does not explain the actions of those who took up arms in the conviction that their cause would ultimately win.<sup>27</sup> I suggest that any explanation

<sup>27</sup> The joyous reactions of *Gama'a* members upon hearing sentences of death or long imprisonment substantiate this point.



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of this phenomenon must take into account the deep impact of a cultural context permeated by a syncretistic brand of Islam in which the miraculous or magical is accepted as a normal part of life. The claim, in short, is that the folk-religion of Upper Egypt's marginalised inhabitants fostered a cognitive framework that was receptive to the notion that a just cause will ultimately triumph, regardless of objective power relationships.

Did Egypt's adoption of a neo-liberal economic development strategy "cause" the *Gama'a's* violent upheaval? The foregoing analysis leads to the conclusion that no simple, direct causal relationship exists. Neo-liberal measures constituted one among several contributing factors that in conjunction explain the *Gama'a's* insurrection. The particular context created by historical conditions, the structure and nature of regional society and its links to national authority, and, finally, the nature of the sub-culture of Upper Egypt provided the setting in which neo-liberal measures helped spark the outbreak of violence.

This said, what must nonetheless be considered is whether the struggle waged by the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya* was unique or, on the other hand, representative of an identifiable type of conflict that is capable of arising in other cultural and national settings.

### **Marginalised Violent Internal Conflict (MVIC)**

Objective historical and social circumstances define the context in which the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya* initiated and developed its conflict against the Egyptian government. Among the more relevant of these were a historical legacy of regional isolation and marginalisation from the centre of national power; a rigidly hierarchical local social structure; a tradition of national rule being extended through patron-client ties between regional elites and central authorities; an underclass, long mired in poverty and neglect; the relatively recent development of opportunities for that underclass to develop ambitions for a better life; and the economically detrimental impact of neo-liberal measures designed to

promote long-term national economic development.

With the exception of the last two factors, the others have sufficient history behind them to have helped shape the cognitive frameworks that characterised the Upper Egyptian sub-culture. Religion, a sub-cultural pillar, was marked by large elements of folk-religion— a syncretistic mixture of orthodox belief and reliance on the magical and miraculous.

The combined impact of rising economic expectations and dashed hopes led, first, to an activist reinterpretation of religion among the most marginalised sectors of Upper Egyptian society and, second, to successful militant mobilisation within those sectors. There erupted an outbreak of sustained violence against the state, conducted by a minority of fighters but widely supported, at least tacitly, at the grassroots level. In pursuing its campaign against the national government, the *Gama'a al-Islamiyya* was clearly aware of the imbalance of power between itself and its opponent but nonetheless long remained optimistic as to the final outcome.

Does such a series of conditions, circumstances and events describe a phenomenon that can occur only in an Egyptian, or Islamic, or Middle Eastern setting? I do not think this is the case. I have elsewhere argued that half a world away from the arid stretches of Upper Egypt— in the highlands of the Mexican state of Chiapas and in the swamps of Nigeria's Ogoniland— generically similar struggles were waged by the Zapatistas and the Ogoni.<sup>28</sup> I have called this type of struggle Marginalised Violent Internal Conflict (MVIC). It is a form of conflict that increasingly threatens today's world.

By the same token, the threat of a recurrence of the conflict in Upper Egypt is still very much alive. Last November, on the tenth anniversary of the Luxor Massacre, a fundamentalist leader who faces two death sentences in Egypt and now resides in London ominously warned of "a new and more dangerous round of terrorism."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> See Tschirgi, *Turning Point*.

<sup>29</sup> "Decade Old Luxor Massacre Changed Tourism, Terrorism in Egypt", *Daily News Egypt*, 17-18 November 2007, p. 2.

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## The Headscarf Issue, Women and the Public Sphere in Turkey



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### Abstract

This study aims to investigate the right-based implications of the question of headscarf for the exercise of citizenship status in Turkey. In particular, I will reconsider the relationship between the discussions on the headscarf and the public sphere, by examining the identity claims of Islamic female students to new rights. This study argues that the question of the headscarf is part of the 'citizenship debate', seen as an issue of human right to articulate different cultural identities and forms.

### Introduction

Turkey's headscarf issue once again became the source of the political crisis as the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) with the support of the opposition Nationalist Action Party (MHP) passed constitutional amendments to lift the ban on the headscarf for female university students in February 2008. The secularist opposition, Republican People's Party (CHP), brought this legislation to the Constitutional Court and then it was outlawed. It was followed by another case file to close down the AKP and ban PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose wife and daughters wear the headscarf, from politics for five years. The AKP and its leaders including PM Erdoğan and even President Gül are accused of violating the principle of secularism. In these allegations the issue of the headscarf is cited as one of the main incitements. It is obvious that the clarification of the scope of the headscarf dispute sheds some light on the dynamics of today's Turkish society and politics.

### Background: Kemalist Modernisation, Public Sphere and the Issue of Dress

In the early years of the Republic (1920s and 1930s), Turkish state-led modernisation resulted in the formation of a public sphere. That was designed as 'secular' and 'national'. Such secure structure faced to a set of serious challenges arising from diversifying civil society in the 1990s. Different religious and ethnic groups began to question the certainties of Kemalism, the Turkish state ideology. Questioning the

boundaries of Turkish public sphere and citizenship, their ultimate goal has been to be represented 'as they are' in the public sphere and achieving cultural rights as well as civic and political ones. The most serious challenge came from Islamist groups together with Kurdish ethno-nationalists. Maintaining a counter-hegemonic movement, Islamists debated and rejected Kemalist secularism that has sought to prevent the public visibility of Islamic groups. At the heart of that struggle on who controls the country's public sphere, there were women. Islamist women and their dress-style became a motto and symbol for Islamist movement. This is a clear challenge to the civilised, secular standards of Kemalism. To understand this struggle well we should know how the Kemalists formed and developed these standards for public visibility and representation.

Kemalist modernisation during the early Republican era sought to create a modern state, society and culture by cutting all ties with the past, the Ottoman/Islamic one.<sup>1</sup> The Kemalist reformers described and imposed the standards of the 'civilised' world on the people. In this regard, the prescriptions for how to talk, how to dress, how to eat, and so on, all were necessary for being publicly visible. In the process, then, instead of the 'old', a new system of politics and education were instituted, new forms of public and private life were set in motion, and new family types and gender roles were introduced. It was 'a new way of life' produced and disseminated by the Turkish state.

1 For the formation of a new Turkish culture and public sphere during the early Republican period see "Nationalism and State in Turkey: Drawing the Boundaries of 'Turkish Culture' in the 1930s", *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 3, 1, 2003, pp. 2-20.

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That life mainly demonstrated political life. The result was the politicisation of all aspects and symbols of life: Language, education, art, literature, history, drinking, dress and so on.

The way to access the new Turkish public sphere was limited as only the new display of the new cultural forms and values was seen as passports to this public sphere. That means that it was only open for those who held and internalised civilised standards and manners. As the Jacobins had done in France,<sup>2</sup> the Kemalist mission of inclusion attributed to transform all that belonged to the private realm, a realm of particularities and tradition. This sought to be done by expanding the public into the private. In this regard, those who reject to accept and assume new manners and behavioural norms were excluded. Exclusion here means to be deprived of gaining a new public identity, that is, of benefiting from the advantages of the state and participating in the public sphere. In short, access to the Turkish public sphere passed through cultural and symbolic assimilation.

In the formation of Turkish public sphere, one of the most important symbolic acts was the hat reform (1925). Actually it was part of the question of dress that was an issue of politics, rather than of fashion, intended to civilise the Turks. The hat, principally valued as one of the images of modernity, was introduced in place of the fez and *sarı́k* (turban) with a legislative act that obliged all men to wear the hat.

For Kemalist modernism, women's dress was also at the heart of the issue. Actually it was part of the general move to see woman as a constructive subject of and a main image for Kemalist social engineering towards Westernisation. Therefore, the creation of a civilised woman with her dress and position in social and family life constituted a central importance for modernisation. In the first instance, to be liberated from the chains of 'tradition', they had to be freed from the uncivilised forms of dress, especially from the veil. Turkish women had to display modern attitudes with their dress and their conduct in the public realm. This was the task of men to show women the true civilised path.<sup>3</sup>

However, correction of the veiling and the practice of women's dress were not carried out in a legislative way as in the hat case. On the

issue, the belief was that, in time, the forward march of modernisation would bring about the end of the usage of the veil in social and private realms. Only upon the request to set the modern style, wives of public servants went unveiled and dressed up like Europeans. Nevertheless, it was obligatory for all women employed as officials and all girls in the schools to dress in a modern way. All these meant that women dressed in the 'traditional' way were deprived of being represented and did not benefit from the public sphere. This fact was heightened with a symbolic, cultural crusade and legal arrangements. During the 1920s and 1930s, the state elite attempted to spread through a nation-wide dress campaign in which local newspapers and officials played an important role to 'enlighten' the people on the new styles. Women, legally empowered and dressed in the modes of Paris, began to be more and more visible in the public realm. A woman dancing at balls and working and being educated side by side with 'shaven' men became henceforth one of the chief images of the Republic, the images by which modernity was symbolised.

By Turkey's transition to a multi-party system in 1946 there began to emerge some claims for the public sphere especially by the forces of the periphery. During the one-party period (1923-1945), new Turkish culture failed to completely replace the wider Islamic allegiances of the people. By Turkish democratisation and structural changes in the 1950s, Islamic customs began to find a political voice under the rule of the Democrat Party (the DP, 1946-1960) in the 1950s. DP rulers came to the fore with a new, 'conservative', interpretation of Kemalist secularism; it sought to reconcile the 'laic' principles of the state and the people's conservative values.<sup>4</sup> The DP followed a different policy on religion, e.g. allowing the call to prayer to be in Arabic again and broadcasting religious programmes in radio. The 'conservative interpretation' that has put its stamp on the Turkish politics until today aimed to make Turkish citizens both 'national' and 'religious'.

Turkish democratisation in the 1950s led to the emergence of a public realm. It was that realm where peripheral forces including traditionalist and Islamic groups began to express themselves at least as being voters and intellectual

2 The Revolution formed a new public life and extended the public into the private sphere. See Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette*, Norton, New York 1990, p. 8.

3 Deniz Kandiyoti, "Gendering the Modern: On Missing Dimensions in the Study of Turkish Modernity", in R. Kasaba & S. Bozdogan, *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 1997, p. 122.

4 Nuray Mert, "Cumhuriyet Türkiye'sinde Laiklik ve Karşı́ Laikliğin Düşünsel Boyutu", in A. Ýnsel (ed.), *Modern Türkiye'de Siyasi Düşünce*, Ýletipim, Ýstanbul, 2001, p. 207.

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circles. The DP played a significant role in their integration into national politics through a democratic mechanism. Condemning the Democrats as violating the country's national interests, in 1960 the Turkish military intervened in politics. The DP was charged as against the Kemalist principle of secularism. Actually what the junta did was to reinstitute 'true Islam' to legitimise their military-political regime and also to prevent religious 'reactionism' and the communist threat.<sup>5</sup> That notion of secularism that expresses the representation of only 'civilised' and 'secular' citizens in a democratic system has been used to justify all interventions (1960, 1971, 1980 and 1997) into democratic processes.<sup>6</sup>

However, the cleavage between the state elite and the representatives of the provincial and peripheral forces led to the failure of those attempts. In time, democratic practices made Islamic groups one of public actors. For the first time, one faction of the Islamic groups formed a political movement, namely Erbakan's National Salvation Party (the MSP). This party became a coalition partner in 1970s governments. Unlike the conservative right groups, the MSP, as a counter-hegemonic movement, rejected the basic doctrine of Kemalist modernisation and proposed an 'alternative' Islamic identity. In 1980, the military intervened once again for the sake of 'national unity and integrity' challenged by leftist, Kurdish and Islamic movements. The 1980 coup maintained an ideological war with religious-social movements and their 'alternative' symbolic world. It was clearly seen in Evren's (head of the coup) insistence on the ban on the headscarf seen as an important sign of Islamists' public appearances. Turgut Özal (PM from 1983 to 1989 and President from 1989 to 1993) challenged that policy. Especially, Özal successfully integrated Islamic groups into the mainstream politics.<sup>7</sup> For example, he took a different attitude to ban the headscarf for female university students and defended the freedom for it as part of his strategy of integration.

Economic and political liberalisation till the early 1990s accelerated the rise of Islamic

groups as socio-economic and political actors in public sphere. Here processes of globalisation played a decisive part, challenging the nation-state's ideas of citizenship and national identity. The result was wars between cultures dominating political and social life all over the world. For Turkey, in a similar way, the process resulted in an extensive crisis of Kemalism that intended to form a homogenous and secular nation.<sup>8</sup> Thus, since the second half of the 1980s, it has been challenged by the identity movements, namely Islamic, Kurdish and Alevi. The domination of identity politics over Turkish politics has been much more obvious in all elections since the early 1990s. Today in Turkish political scene all political parties represented in the assembly define their position largely by their cultural stance rather than socio-economic policy choice.

### From Islamist to 'Neo-Islamist' Perspective and Public Sphere

The rise of Islamism as a counter-hegemonic movement was mainly the result of the above-mentioned globalisation processes. Islamism came to represent new provincial businessmen, intellectuals and poor segments of the society who are excluded from socio-economic, cultural and political power.<sup>9</sup> It gradually became the voice of socially and economically excluded groups who have difficulties to access the country's public sphere. There began to emerge a new set of Islamic social networks in which religious traditions are reinterpreted and disseminated and the young learn 'real Islam'. For our purposes, the major end product of this trend is the emergence of 'alternative' public spaces in which many of the conservative masses began to socialise within a very different set of values and forms. In these spaces, new body politics, new kinds of eating, new fashions and artistic styles were displayed and disseminated.<sup>10</sup> The new situation was challenging Kemalist modernisation for which just only the 'secular way of life' is a necessary precondition for public visibility.

In these new alternative spaces Islamic women with different 'Islamic' clothes began to appear. For Islamist rhetoric women symbolised

5 Ümit Cizre, "Parameters and Strategies of Islam-State Interaction in Republican Turkey", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 28, 1996, p. 239.

6 Yılmaz Çolak & Ertan Aydın, "Dilemmas of Turkish Democracy: The Encounter Between Kemalist Secularism and Political Islamism in the 1990s", in D. W. Odell-Scott (ed.), *Democracy and Religion*, Kentucky State University Press, Ohio, 2004.

7 Binnaz Toprak, "Islam and the Secular State in Turkey", in Ç. Balým (ed.), *Turkey: Political, Social and Economic Challenges in the 1990s*, Brill, Leiden, 1995, p. 95.

8 Hakan Yavuz, "Turkey's Fault Lines and the Crisis of Kemalism", *Current History*, January 2000, pp. 33-38.

9 See Ziya Önis, "Political Islam at the Crossroads: From Hegemony to Co-existence", *Contemporary Politics*, 7, 4, 2001, pp. 281-296.

10 Nilüfer Göle, *Melez Desenler (Hybrid Patterns)*, Metis, İstanbul, 2000, p. 30.



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the virtue and integrity of 'Islamic society'. It means that Islamists put the issue of women at the centre of their political struggle as activists and bearers of the movement.<sup>11</sup> The headscarf performed a function of integrating women from conservative sections of the society into public sphere. And so it appeared as a vehicle of modernisation for these women and these sections of the society.<sup>12</sup>

The Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, the RP, 1983-1998), the successor of 1970s' MSP, became the political voice of Islamic groups. The RP successfully mobilised the excluded, especially the traditionalist religious segments of the society. Using much more populist rhetoric with cross-class demands, the RP tried to unite the peripheral businessmen and urban poor and workers around a 'common Islamic identity'. RP leaders were doing that with a claim that they represented the 'true values' and morals of the society against the laic state's oppressive rule.

The RP effectively launched its message throughout the country with the help of the party's nation-wide grassroots organisation. By a populist tone embracing all segments and ethnic and religious differences in the election campaigns the RP became a leading party in the 1995 elections and came to power as a major partner of the coalition government in 1996. For the first time, a political leader with Islamic inclinations became the Prime Minister. Although RP leaders pragmatically promised to obey the rules of the game even before the 1995 elections, they continued to emphasise some symbols, like the headscarf, that the secularists did not want to see in the public sphere. At the heart of this new symbolic world, there were women and their public appearances. In this sense it is important to mention that the new PM and many ministers began to publicly appear more and more with their wife dressed in the 'Islamic' way with their headscarf.

Against the RP-led government, a Kemalist bloc (including the military, the judiciary, a group of intellectuals, etc.) began to form. It highlighted some of the RP's policies and attitudes as sign of reactionary moves threatening the secular republic. By launching a nation-wide campaign and effectively using the National Security Council (NSC) the Turkish military once again intervened into the democratic processes in 1997 generally known as the February 28 process.<sup>13</sup> It was an 'indirect' intervention

against the Islamic groups. Upon that, some legislation and other measures began to be launched to reduce the political and social visibility of the Islamic groups. As a result of the Kemalist bloc's pressures, the RP-TPP coalition government was ended in June 1997. And then, accusing of being the centre of all anti-secular activities, the Constitutional Court banned the RP in January 1998 and its leading cadre including Erbakan was banned from politics for a period of five years. The Virtue Party (*Fazilet Partisi*, the FP), the successor of the RP, became the third party in the 1999 elections. The Constitutional Court banned it too in January 2001 mainly citing the reason that it defended wearing the headscarf in the public realm.

By the late 1990s we can see a radical change in the political rhetoric of FP leaders. Unlike the RP, the FP adopted a more moderate rhetoric stressing the expansion of individual rights and liberties and the necessity of EU membership. It is a new strategy for co-existence with the secular state.<sup>14</sup> After its closure in 2001, its two successors— the Felicity Party founded by Erbakan's close friends in 2001 and the Justice and Development Party (AKP) founded under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the former mayor of Istanbul— also adopted this strategy of co-existence.

Such transformation became evident by the late 1990s in almost all segments of Islamic groups. In general, the Islamic movement has moved from a conflict-ridden view of communal identity to more privatised, individualised life and politics of integration. This is very evident in the case of the AKP. At this point one might argue that this movement is linked to the 'neo-Islamic' claim that there is a right to a separate identity considered within the framework of human rights and global values. Islamic circles are voicing more loudly a right to public representation and more toleration of their symbols and rituals in the public sphere as part of human rights.<sup>15</sup>

The AKP came to the fore as the voice of 'neo-Islamic' demands. In the 2002 elections it received thirty four per cent of the votes and gained an overwhelming majority with 363 seats in the 550 member parliament. In the 2007 elections it repeated its victory by increasing its votes to forty six per cent. Rejecting an exclusive 'Islamic' identity, the AKP is portrayed as a

11 S. Sallan Gül & Hüseyin Gül, "The Question of Women in Islamic Revivalism in Turkey: A Review of the Islamic Press," *Current Sociology*, 48, 2, April 2000, p. 21.

12 See Nilüfer Göle, *The Forbidden Modern: Civilization and Veiling*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1996.

13 See Yılmaz Çolak, "Kültür-Devlet İlişkisi Çerçevesinde 28 Subat Müdahalesi", in *C. D.'de Siyasal Düşünce ve Modernleşme*, 3, pp. 465-494, Ankara, Ýmaj Yay, 2002.

14 Önis, "Political Islam", p. 288.

15 See Yılmaz Çolak, "Citizenship between Secularism and Islamism in Turkey", in F. Keyman and A. İçduygu (eds.), *Citizenship in a Global World*, Routledge, London, 2005, pp. 242-66.

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'conservative democratic' party. AKP leaders attach the greatest importance to Turkey's EU membership. They are dealing with the headscarf issue and the state's control over religion on the basis of tolerance and individual rights. These are thus directly related to the expression of religion in the public sphere by which, in their views, the tension between the secular and the conservative sections of the society would be eliminated.

### The Scope of the Headscarf Issue

Before 1980, although there were a few cases of female university students attempting to wear the headscarf on university campuses, the headscarf did not become part of any political debate. The debate on appropriate dress for Muslim women came with the public appearances of Islamic groups by the early 1980s. Some of female university students who covered their heads with a large scarf and wore long lightweight overcoats began to appear on campuses as a sign of their commitment to Islam. This public appearance incited the guardians of Turkish secularism degrading such dress style as a symbol of 'reactionism'. The then President Evren (1983-1989) took some counter measures to prevent it. In 1987 the Higher Education Council (YOK) issued a regulation banning the wearing of headscarves by female university students in class. And then, for the first time, in 1989 the Constitutional Court banned the headscarf in university buildings by overriding the legislation that allowed the female students to go to classes with their headscarves. But the Parliament where the right-wing parties constituted a majority in turn passed another legislation supporting the right to dress for university students. At that point, Özal played a decisive role by rejecting the view that the headscarf is simply a symbol of rising Islamic 'reactionism' against the secular regime. He saw it as a matter of individual rights.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, until his death in 1993, there was a tolerant attitude towards the headscarf in the universities and so female university students continued to appear on campuses with their headscarves. However, since then, the ban on headscarf became widespread again.

With the rise of the RP in the mid-1990s, the headscarf issue entered a new phase. Constructing the headscarf as one of the main symbols in their ideology to define the profile of Muslims, RP leaders in election campaigns put more emphasis on the freedom for the headscarf and promised to make it and other 'Islamic

rituals' legitimate. When the RP was in power, its leader (N. Erbakan) made some provocative statements to satisfy his followers. Here women's dress once again came to be a separating marker for most Turkish citizens, the marker between 'secularists' and 'Islamists'. As explained above, in the February 28 process, the RP and later the FP were banned, citing the headscarf as one of the main reasons. For those initiators of February 28, the headscarf is not a religious obligation; it is part of Arab women's attire. The intervention enforces some restrictions on 'non-authorised' religious appearances and expressions in all state offices and state-run institutions. In 1998, YOK expanded the ban on the headscarf in universities by new regulations. Then students with the headscarf began to be disallowed from even entering campuses, and female university professors wearing headscarves even outside campuses were dismissed. The headscarf ban was expanded to cover all public institutions and organisations. Female school teachers with headscarves were dismissed. This ban was extended to cover outside schools. A recent case happened in 2006. A school teacher was dismissed because of wearing headscarf while going to her school on the way, but taking it off before she entered to the school garden.

This move also includes some measures to check whether or not some civil servants' spouses and daughters wear headscarves. For example, a rule to monitor the headscarf was introduced in university residential apartments under a directive of the YOK in September 2000. In terms of monitoring the wife of the officials to check whether or not they wear headscarves, the military since the mid-1990s strictly implemented the practice that military officials whose wives wear headscarves and who participate in religious prayers will be fired. Even by that time, there had been some kind of a prohibition on the presence of civilian women with headscarves in military zones. This is done by making a distinction between *türban* (seen as a symbol of political Islam) and *basörtüsü* (traditional Turkish head scarf). Mothers and sisters with *türban* (headscarf) could not attend the ceremonies of their sons and brothers taking the oath of military service. Parallely, some universities have not allowed women with the headscarf to attend the graduation ceremonies of their offsprings.

To set an example for the appearance and representation of religious women in the public sphere for this period, the case of Merve

<sup>16</sup> See Dađý, "Human Rights", p. 36.

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Kavakçı, the first woman parliamentarian, who wore the headscarf has utmost importance. She was elected to the Turkish Parliament in 1999 from the FP and became the first parliamentarian to wear a headscarf. But she was prevented from serving her term because of this. And then she lost her Turkish citizenship and was banned from politics for a period of five years when her party, the FP, was banned in 2001.

The dispute over the headscarf during the presidency of Ahmet Necdet Sezer (2000-2007) turned into a debate on the boundaries of the public sphere. After the AKP came to power with a great majority in 2002, Sezer had never invited AKP leaders' and deputies' wives who wore headscarves to receptions on National Days at the President's Palace (*Çankaya Köskü*). The secularists defended that by claiming that the headscarf should not be seen in the public sphere.

In the media, the opponents of the headscarf's appearance in the public sphere saw his policy as necessary to protect the regime. Derya Sazak, supporting Sezer, wrote that "Ahmet Necdet Sezer defends main values of the republic by forbidding the headscarf in Çankaya Palace."<sup>17</sup> Another supporter, Mehmet Y. Yılmaz, in his article entitled "Public Sphere is a Boundary of Headscarf", wrote: "If public officers use some symbols while performing public service, they act against public order. Public sphere is related with providing public services. So officers can not reveal their political ideologies with their symbols."<sup>18</sup> One of the radical opponents argued that the headscarf will take Turkey to the past: "The headscarf is a reactionary symbol, so it is against the main principles of republican revolution, and, in addition to this, it represents the wish of reactionaries to clash with the republican institutions."<sup>19</sup> For them it signifies the political tendency of those who want to destroy the Republic in a revolutionary way; and the headscarf is their flag.<sup>20</sup> For one of the women opponents of the headscarf, Türkan Seylan, there are some people who force girls to wear headscarves; which is why political Islam is very dangerous having a potential which

would force women to wear the headscarves and Kemalists should protect the regime with laws against it. This is closely related to their attitude towards AKP leaders that PM Erdoğan and his friends have a 'hidden agenda' to change the regime with their support to religious groups and their life styles and symbols (headscarf); all these make AKP an 'enemy of the regime'.<sup>21</sup> In this rhetoric, Çankaya is constructed as a public place of the republic where no symbols of archaism can enter.

Sezer's attitude was criticised by liberals and conservatives in the media. For Hasan Cemal, a leading columnist in *Milliyet*, he was making a discrimination between those who wear the headscarf and those who do not. That discrimination narrowed the scope of the public sphere.<sup>22</sup> In a similar vein, Etyen Mahçupyan condemned his and other opponents' concept of public sphere: "(T)heir concept of public sphere is not directly related to the concept of the republic. So, they call the sphere of their rule as public sphere. When they see a girl with headscarf in the balcony of her house, they think that the girl is a danger for their government."<sup>23</sup> On the discussion around Sezer's attempt to draw the boundaries of Turkish public sphere, Hayrettin Karaman (a 'neo-Islamic' scholar) argues that a secular democratic republican regime does not make a separation between its citizens in the basis of their religious orientations. So being present in the public sphere with a symbol of a religion or a community is against the idea of secularism protecting citizens' beliefs and conscience.<sup>24</sup> Within this framework, in a later piece, he says that covered women who want to participate in social life freely face the regime's restrictions and they live in a world of psychological and social problems.<sup>25</sup>

Some liberal intellectuals proposed a strategy of making a distinction between those who are taking services from the state and those who are giving. According to this view, in the public sphere, the state officials could not wear headscarf symbolising a certain religious outlook; otherwise, this might cause suspicion about the impartiality of the service. On the other hand,

17 Derya Sazak, "Türban ve Çankaya seçimi" (Headscarf and Choice of Çankaya), *Milliyet*, 31 October 2003.

18 Mehmet Yılmaz, "Türbanın Sınır Kamusal Alanı" (Public Sphere is a Boundary of Headscarf), *Milliyet*, 23 October 2003.

19 Emin Çölağın, "Bölügeray Pa'adan Mektup Var" (A Letter from Bölügeray Pasha), *Hürriyet*, 1 May 2003.

20 See the evaluations of Mehmet Ali Birand, *Hürriyet*, 7 June 2006.

21 Özdemir Ynce, *Hürriyet*, 21 June 2005.

22 *Milliyet*, 15 November 2005.

23 Etyen Mahçupyan, "Baörtüsüyle Balkona Çıkılabilir mi?" (Does One with Headscarf Appear in the Balcony?), *Zaman*, 16 November 2003.

24 Hayrettin Karaman, "Laiklik, Resepsiyon ve Baörtüsü" (Secularism, Reception and Headscarf), *Yeni aafak*, 31 October 2003.

25 Hayrettin Karaman, "Türban Tartışması" (Headscarf Debate), *Yeni aafak*, 12 March 2004.

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in public spaces such as hospitals, public offices, courts, ceremonies or universities, citizens may exist either as service client or participant with any religious or other symbols. For this perspective, female university students with headscarves should be considered in this category; as citizens they have the right to receive education service from the state. But, according to the secularists, if female university students are allowed to go to universities with headscarves, they would go forward; after graduation, to work, for example, as judge or public prosecutors with their headscarves, which is a political symbol.

It is clear from the above discussion that liberals and conservatives have seen the headscarf as a form of expression of individuals' religious identity and the necessity of its representation in the public sphere. Indeed, by the evaluation of the Islamic movement, the headscarf issue is coming to represent much more a demand for a human right to articulate different cultural religious identities. Thus, it seems much more a part of individual or private matters, rather than a collective, counter-hegemonic identity. This may be exemplified by two recent studies on 'Islamic' women and the headscarf. One of them done by Aysel Kadıođlu on Islamic NGOs and women who suffered the ban highlights that NGOs and 'Islamic' women see the headscarf as part of their human rights and their choice should be respected.<sup>26</sup> The second study done by Genel and Karaosmanođlu on female university students with headscarves stresses the emergence of 'a new Islamic individualism' expressed mainly by Muslim women in Turkey.<sup>27</sup>

During the continuing debate on the headscarf in which the public is divided into two blocs in early 2008, a group of university students with headscarves opened an internet forum entitled as "A 'public sphere' that we cannot walk arm in arm is not our 'public sphere'!".<sup>28</sup> It explains the above mentioned new individuality: "We oppose the racist subjection of veiled women, via being considered as 'Islamic robots' by such adjectives as ignorant, bigoted, mischievous, disingenuous, opportunist, fuddy-duddy. We oppose the sexist consideration of

not-veiled women as if they are sexual commodities, exhibitionists, seducers.... And we think that the suppression of women can be overcome only in an environment of peace and by the practice of rights and liberties would be able to overcome the suppression over the women.... We, the women reject the control over our bodies in the name of modernism, secularism, republic, religion, tradition, custom, morality, honour or freedom."

### Conclusion

Female university students with headscarves have become a source of transformation for Turkey's traditional structures, as they have struggled for respect and justice and for acceptance as active bearers of the public sphere. But at the same time they have become a source of conflict about the definition of the Turkish citizen. Significantly, this conflict is now being experienced across Turkish political life as the secularists see the headscarf as a divisive symbol and so as a challenge to the privileged position of Kemalist secularism and citizenship. Nowadays, the headscarf issue finds its new expression in 'neo-Islamic' claims that aim to expand the citizenship rights by stressing the headscarf issue as a matter of 'freedom' and 'equality'. It is becoming much more an individual or private matter. This new stance is totally opposite to 1990s Islamism defending 'communal' rights of the 'Muslims' vis-à-vis the secular state.

From everything else, it is clear that the headscarf issue is a part of women's presence and their representation in the public sphere and the exercise of their citizenship rights. Wearing a headscarf is part of the citizenship debate as it indicates women's cultural claims as the right to religious practice and expression. The Turkish case shows us that the restrictions over the representation of different groups in the public sphere seem to be a obstacle to public dialogue. It is this dialogue that would help to overcome polarisation over cultural symbols.

26 Aysel Kadıođlu, "Civil Society, Islam and Democracy in Turkey: A Study of Three Islamic Non-Governmental Organizations", *The Muslim World*, 95, January 2005, p. 39.

27 Sema Genel & Kerem Karaosmanođlu, "A New Islamic Individualism in Turkey: Headscarved Women in the City," *Turkish Studies*, 7, 3, September 2006, pp. 484-85.

28 <http://birbirimizahipcikiyoruz.blogspot.com>.



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## Inter-Societal Comparative Study of the Role of Cultural Beliefs in India and China on Biodiversity Conservation



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### Abstract

In this era of rapid industrialisation all over the globe preservation of biodiversity is proving to be a concern not only for environmentalists but also for common people conscious of the threats to the environment. This article looks at the traditional beliefs and practices of different tribes of China, namely Hani, Naxi, Dai, Yi etc. It also examines the concept of the sacred mountains, gardens, forests and water bodies prevalent since ancient times in India. The article also mentions briefly the relevant bibliography. It is hoped that a comparative study of these traditional practices in India and China will pave the way to a better consciousness and effort to preserve our biodiversity.

### Introduction

Biodiversity conservation is currently the buzzword among environmentalists in particular and economists, planners and politicians in general, in the wake of rapid industrialisation that the world has experienced over the past few decades. This is all the more important in case of India and China, the two most populous nations of the world; both aspiring to become economic powerhouses and have adopted rapid industrialisation to achieve this goal. However, in view of the ever burgeoning population and rapid industrialisation, biodiversity conservation assumes great significance in these two countries to stave off an environmental disaster and merits much attention.

While biodiversity conservation may be a relatively new term, its essence has been practised over centuries in both India and China, two very old and great civilisations; it has been ingrained in the cultural beliefs and practices that have been handed down over generations. These strategies were highly congruent to the traditional lifestyle of the respective societies. In many parts of India, local people even now follow several such traditional conservation practices. They include "totemism" in which one or more species of plants or animals are protected as spiritual ancestors, restraint on hunting female animals, conserving certain species for rituals, keeping aside patches of forests and

water bodies in the name of local deities and so on.

The sacred conservation practices followed by local people, particularly the forest dependent people, have come into focus of late due to their importance for protecting several delicate ecosystems and threatened species, the explicit connections they show between cultural and biological diversity, and their potential of people oriented conservation efforts. The relationship between cultural and biological diversity has been two-way, one arising partly as a response to the other, and in turn being nurtured by it. While it would be anthropocentric and incorrect to say that biodiversity in our forests and wetlands survives due to human cultures, it is certainly true that cultural traditions have helped conserve many of them against the forces of destruction, and it is also a fact that in human-influenced systems, we have actually enhanced diversity at a genetic level. For instance, one species of rice has been diversified into over 50,000 varieties, by the so-called "illiterate" farmers. It is not accidental that we call it "*agri-culture*", even though development advocates would like to convert it into "*agro-nomy*", with a search for profits undermining the essential cultural and spiritual bonds between farmers and the land, seed, and water.<sup>1</sup>

Chinese-Indian cultural and scientific con-

1 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, Vol. I, Vol. IV, Part 3, Vol. V, Part 1 and Vol. VI, Part 2, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992.

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tacts are well-known and date back many centuries. They include Buddhist pilgrims, voyagers, ambassadors, alchemists, and mathematicians. It would be highly interesting to examine and compare the role of cultural beliefs and practices of these two ancient societies that helped conserve and flourish our biodiversity.

### Sacred Practices in China

China is a multi-ethnic country, having fifty six ethnic groups<sup>2</sup> some of these are:

**Han:** With a population of about 1.159 billion, it forms the main body of the Chinese nation. The Han people inhabit most regions in China, but mainly live in the Yellow, Yangtze and Pearl river valleys. Han Chinese is the common language of both Hans and the majority of ethnic minorities.

**Yi:** One of the oldest ethnic groups in China, with a population of 6.5 million. The Yi people are mainly distributed in Yunnan, Sichuan and Guizhou provinces and the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

**Dai:** A group of 1.02 million people inhabiting Xishuangbanna and some other areas in Yunnan Province. Most of the Dai people are believers in Hinayana (the Little Vehicle of Salvation) of Buddhism.

**Naxi:** A group living mainly in Lijiang area of Yunnan Province, with a population of 270,000. The Dongba Script created by the Naxi people more than 1,000 years ago is now the only well preserved pictographic writing in the world.

**Hani:** With a population of 1.25 million, the Hani is an ethnic group living and engaged in farming in the mountains of Yunnan Province.

Each of these ethnic groups has its own distinctive sacred practices that reflect on the wisdom of the ancients to protect the environment and biodiversity.

The Dai people have a reverential love of water, as to them it is the source of all life. In the Dai epic *Bata Maga Peng Shangluo*, the creator Yingba combines water with other substances to create a world where water defines the earth and is the origin of all things. Dai homes are usually built beside rivers and streams. A colourful holy tower inlaid with mirrors is built over the village well to invoke blessing and protection from the gods, and also covers it, keeping out dust and insects. Dai children learn from an early age not to play near this sacred tower. For centuries, the Dai people have tried to protect their environment and their traditional irrigation systems through a range of communal rules, institutions, and festivals. These included the appointment of village specialists in water. Running water is an integral aspect of Dai life.

At the Dai New Year Water-Splashing Festival in mid-April all Dai people living in various parts of Yunnan Province celebrate their intimate relationship with water. It is probably the biggest and most significant of the hundreds of minority festivals held in Yunnan. It is interesting to compare the love of water of Dai People with the reverence with water the river Ganges is held in India. This mighty river is mythologically described as the daughter of the God Shiva and its pollution in the twentieth Century caused much outrage among common Indians that the Government of India was forced to implement several pollution control programmes called the "Ganga Action Plan".

The people of the Naxi ethnic minority mostly live in the Naxi Autonomous County in Lijiang, Yunnan Province, while the rest live in Sichuan and Tibet. Their population is 308,893 according to the 2000 census. In the name Naxi (also spelled Nakhi), Na means 'senior and honored' and Xi means 'people'. The Naxi people live on farming, stockbreeding and handicrafts.

Reaches of the Jinshajiang River are abundant in botanical resources such as trees and medicinal herbs. The Lijiang horse has also enjoyed the reputation for years as one of the 'Three treasures of Lijiang' which were presented to the official courts because of its ability to transport goods in mountainous area.

About 1.25 million Hani people live in the Yunnan Province. The Hani are originally from the Tibetan Plateau. *Ha* means 'snow, strong, and brave'. *Ni* suggests the people who live in mountains. The Hani are thus a strong, brave, and mountain-dwelling people.<sup>3</sup> The Hani have a tradition of preserving forests in the mountainous areas in which they live. As an ethnic group residing primarily in southern Yunnan and bordering northern parts of Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand, the Hani have kept harmonious relations with their natural surroundings for many centuries. Forest and watersheds are preserved by village consent. According to Hani cultural beliefs, humans are a part of the natural world in which everything has its own spirit. Most of the spirits repose in forests. Human activities such as collecting forest products, hunting, and cutting trees in these forests are taboo for Hani villagers.

The Chinese government has grouped the Nisu, Nasu, Sani, Axi, Lolopo, Pu, and scores of other peoples speaking more than six completely distinct languages with dozens of dialects into a single group called the Yi. Because of this, a Yi from one area may not be able to communicate with a Yi from another area; and may or may not even agree that they both are Yi. Most of

2 Xiaotong Fei, "Ethnic Identification in China", *Social Sciences in China*, Vol. 1, 1980, pp. 94-107.

3 Y. Ma, *A brief introduction to Yunnan's history*, Yunnan People's Press, Kunming, China, 1983.

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the Yi are farmers; herders of cattle, sheep and goats; and nomadic hunters. Only about one third of the Yi are literate. Most have no written language.

Legend has it that the Yi are descended from the ancient Qiang people of today's Western China, who are also said to be the ancestors of the Tibetan, Naxi and Qiang peoples. They migrated from Southeastern Tibet through Sichuan and into Yunnan Province, where their largest populations can be found today.

They practice a form of animism, led by a *Shaman* priest known as the *Bimaw*. They still retain a few ancient religious texts written in their unique pictographic script. Their religion also contains many elements of Daoism and Buddhism.

The richness of cultural diversity in China is undeniable. From the point of view of the state, ethnic minorities or marginalised populations are particularly significant: They live predominantly in frontier or geographically peripheral areas and therefore have a strategic role. Thus, the relationship between the state and local ethnic people directly affects internal and external stability.<sup>4</sup> The state in China has paid attention to these peripheral areas because of the natural resources they contain and the land available for settlement. Consequently, China has a recent history of attempting to consolidate the state by the official inclusion of minority peoples. In late Imperial China, ethnic inclusion policies adopted a strategy of filling the "strategic space" by bringing minorities more closely into the cultural and economic orbit of the centre through resettlement. This strategy was continued after the People's Republic of China was founded, and policies toward ethnic people became intrinsically linked to national development efforts.

### Traditional Practices in India

On the Indian front, important work is published on different sacred trees and includes "Neem in socio-cultural life in South Asia" by S. Ahmed;<sup>5</sup> "Tulsi – A sacred plant" by M. Amirthalingam;<sup>6</sup> "On the cult of the plantain tree and its ethnographical significance in Bengal" by A. Bhattacharya;<sup>7</sup> "Ethno-botanical folk practices

and Beliefs of the Ao-nagas in Nagaland, India" by S. Changkija and Y. Kumar.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, important work has been published on sacred animals in India by several authors and includes "Religious sentiment and wildlife" by M. K. Ranjitsingh;<sup>9</sup> "Ecological Prudence of the Lepchas" by A. Jha;<sup>10</sup> and "Tree and Snake Worship" by J. A. Fergusson.<sup>11</sup>

People all over India worship the neem tree. The Hindu goddess Arulmigu Mariamman is synonymous with the neem tree and is worshipped for her curative powers. In many communities neem leaves are hung in bunches at the entrance to the house as a symbolic way to keep out infestations and evil spirit. Tulsi or the sacred basil is regarded as the most sacred herb in India with a hoary past. It is believed the Goddess Shri has been incorporated in it. The sacred herb not only has religious significance, but it also has important medicinal and environmental uses. Among the existing tree-cults of Bengal the cult of the plantain tree has some special features.

By recognising the divinity in animals, Indian traditions give them an equal position unsurpassed by any other tradition. Heritage is the cultural, social and spiritual legacy that we inherit from our past and pass on to the future. Indian heritage is unique in its reverence for Mother Nature in all Her manifestations. Ancient traditions, rituals and practices have embedded this reverence in religion and even in normal day-to-day living. The respect for all nature and belief that every organism on earth has a special role in life's cycle forms the core of our ecological heritage.

The celestial river Ganga, the pristine Himalayas, the imposing Mahabodhi tree at Gaya, the devoted temple elephants of Guruvayoor, the Ki Law Kyntang (sacred forests) of Meghalaya, the eco-friendly lifestyle of the Bishnois of Rajasthan and the numerous *nandavanams kunds*, and *yeris* are all examples of the rich ecological heritage of India. Many animal species have been traditionally protected and continue to be conserved in many parts of our country.

Animals have been traditionally considered

4 T. Herberer, "Some considerations on China's minorities in the 21st Century: conflict or reconciliation?", Institute for East Asian Studies Working Paper, No. 13, Duisburg University, Duisberg, Germany, 2000.

5 S. Ahmed, "Neem in Sociocultural Life in South Asia", *The Neem Tree*, VCH, Weinheim, Germany, 1995, pp. 579-584.

6 M. Amirthalingam, "Tulsi – A Sacred Plant", *Kisan World*, Vol. 25, No.1, 1998, p. 45.

7 A. Bhattacharya, "On the Cult of the Plantain Tree and its Ethnographical Significance in Bengal", *Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society*, Vol. XLI, No. 1, 1950, pp. 1-7.

8 S. Changkija & Y. Kumar, "Ethnobotanical Folk Practices and Beliefs of the Ao-Nagas in Nagaland, India", *Ethnobotany*, Vol. 8, 1996, pp. 26-30.

9 A. Jha, "Ecological Prudence of the Lepchas", *Development Alternatives*, Vol. 8, No. 6, 1998, pp. 5-6.

10 M. K. Ranjitsingh, "Religious Sentiment and Wildlife", *Beyond the Tiger- Portraits of Asian Wildlife*, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 193-197.

11 J. A. Fergusson, *Tree and Serpent Worship*, Indological Book House, New Delhi, 1971.

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sacred for the following reasons:

Some animals are worshipped as deities themselves, for example, Ganesha- the elephant-headed God and Hanuman, the monkey God. The aboriginal Naga tribes of Nagaland follow rich ethno-botanical, cultural and folk practices. Nagas have been utilising plants growing in their surroundings not only as sources of food and herbal medicines, but also for their traditional religious ceremonies and beliefs.

The Lepchas, tribal communities of Sikkim, have a unique conservation philosophy that preserves rare migratory birds and animals.

Local community safeguards wildlife due to their religious sentiments.

Many animals are considered as vehicles of the deities and hence developed sanctity, for example, Garuda (Brahminy Kite), the *vahana* of Lord Vishnu and Nandi (Bull), the vehicle of Lord Shiva.

Animals have also been regarded as the abode (either temporary or permanent) of the souls of the dead. Sometimes, even as the actual soul of the dead. For example, Crow and the Dog are sometimes regarded as repositories of the soul of the dead.

The sanctity of an animal may also be based on their economic value. For example, the water buffalo is venerated by Todas (a small pastoral tribe of the Nilgiris in southern India) who rely on the animal for their sustenance.

Sacred gardens are an ancient tradition in many major cultures, including Indian. They are the cultivated counterparts of the sacred groves and are a place for meditation, spiritual awakening and celebration. While there is ample archaeological evidence of early gardens in India, the Hindu scriptures and books (*Ramayana*, *Abijnana Shakuntalam*, *Mrichchakatika* etc.) give remarkably detailed description of elaborate gardens with flowerbeds, lotus ponds, fruiting trees, creepers and shady spaces. In fact, gardens were a symbol of paradise in Hindu philosophy and art.

Sacred groves comprise of patches of forests or natural vegetation- from a few trees to forests of several acres- that are usually dedicated to local folk deities (example- *Ayyanar* and *Amman*) or tree spirits (*Vanadevatais*). These spaces are protected by local communities because of their religious beliefs and traditional rituals that run through several generations.

The degree of sanctity of the sacred forests varies from one grove to another. In some forests even the dry foliage and fallen fruits are not touched. People believe that any kind of disturbance will offend the local deity, causing diseases, natural calamities or failure of crops. For example, the *Garo* and the *Khasi* tribes of northeastern India completely prohibit any human interference in the sacred groves. In other groves, deadwood or dried leaves may be

picked up, but the live tree or its branches are never cut. For example, the *Gonds* of central India prohibit the cutting of a tree but allow fallen parts to be used.

### Sacred Mountain

As one of the most dramatic features of the natural landscape, mountains have an extraordinary power to evoke spirituality. For example, Mount Kailasha is revered as the abode of Shiva. Traditionally, some mountains are also held sacred due to their association with deities, mythology or legends. For example, Mount Govardhana at Brindavana (in Northern India) is revered for its association with Lord Krishna. Mountains are also held revered as places of spiritual attainment.

### Sacred Water Bodies

In India, water has been an object of worship from time immemorial. Water plays a vital role in holy rituals / rites. It cleanses our body and hence, symbolises purification. It has diverse socio-religious uses and plays a central role in many religious ceremonies and rites. Water and in turn water bodies have been traditionally held sacred for the following reasons. Almost all rivers, lakes, springs are attributed some degree of holiness and are often associated with the local pantheon of Gods and Goddesses. Most Indian rivers are usually believed to be manifestations (*avatars*) of Goddesses. Rivers have been given a divine status and have been worshipped since ancient times.

Tanks (*Kundas*) are an integral part of India's famous and highly evolved traditional water management systems. In areas (particularly the Deccan peninsula) where the rivers are not snow-fed, the different kinds of tanks- percolation ponds, natural lakes, artificial reservoirs and temple tanks- proved to be of great use. While the ponds, lakes and artificial reservoirs were used for activities like irrigation, washing etc., the temple tanks were sanctified and the waters were drawn only in times of drought etc.

### Sacred Plants

Tree or plant worship has its roots in ancient times and continues to be an element of modern Indian traditions. Tree cults, in which a single or groves of trees have been worshipped, have flourished in India throughout history. In the scriptures, mention of the *Kalpavriksha* and *Chaityavriksha* is found, indicating that the worship of the plants is indeed an ancient Indian practice.

Plants have been traditionally considered sacred for the following reasons:

Trees often have a close association with a deity. For example- *Bilva* tree (*Aegle marmelos*) with Lord Shiva, *Neem* tree (*Azadirachta indica*) with *Mariamman* and *Tulsi* (*Ocimum sanctum*) with Lord Krishna.

Trees sheltering any object of worship like a deity, a fetish or a weapon have traditionally been considered sacred. *Sthalavrikshas* are



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actually trees that first sheltered an open-air shrine, which was later replaced by a temple or shelter for the deity. The sacred tree became secondary and was worshipped along with other nature gods as the *Sthalavrikshas* of the temple and became an inseparable part of the faith. Some plants are believed to have originated from bodies or limbs of Gods and hence, the sanctity. For example, the Flame of the forest (*Butea monosperma*) is believed to have originated from the body of Lord Brahma and the *Rudraksha* tree (*Elaeocarpus ganitrus*) rose from the tears of Lord Shiva.

Some plants become sacred through what might have occurred in their proximity. For example, the *Peepal* tree (*Ficus religiosa*), under which Gautama Buddha attained enlightenment, is considered sacred by the Buddhists.

Plants that have an important social or economic significance or a major role in the local ecology are also considered sacred. For example, the veneration of the *Khejri* tree (*Prosopis spicigera*) by the Bishnois of Rajasthan is related to the crucial role the tree plays in the

desert ecology. It provides the community with food, fodder and building material.<sup>12</sup>

### Conclusion

For biodiversity conservation, environmental scientists are nowadays trying to understand the traditional practices which should be encouraged and propagated. Such encouragement usually gives better results in conservation of the flora and fauna than dictats which do not have any roots among the common people. In the past traditional beliefs were often sneered at as superstitions and unnecessary religious practices but these are in fact age-old practices for environmental protection in the garb of religious sermons and taboos. This comparative survey of the practices of the indigenous peoples of India and China that help and protect our environment should raise the environmental awareness of the common people, improve their understanding and respect for their own traditional practices countries and pave the way to a better understanding of the these two great neighbours.

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12 G. C. M. Birdwood, *The Arts of India*, Rupa & Co., Calcutta, 1992. The book "The Arts of India" is the most authoritative and important reference works on Indian Art. The book contains a wealth of information and is amply illustrated. A glance through the contents pages will show the wide scope of the work and the thoroughness, which went into its preparation. Many of the subjects described were at one time plentiful. As a source of reference it is indispensable and provides in a single volume more information than general works on India. The first part of the book discusses the sacred animals, plants and trees, places, mountains and rivers. See also, Maneka Gandhi and Yasmin Singh, *On the mythology of Indian plants*, Rupa & Co., New Delhi, 1989. Many plants are considered holy. Plants are often associated with many myth and folklore. The plants are associated and identified with gods, planets, months, etc., certain plants are used as protection against witchcraft and the evil eye. Some plants bring luck and are offered in the temples and others play an important part in other religious rites. The author discusses the thirty most important trees and plants along with the myths and folklore connected with each. The sketches related to myth and tree.

## Across the South

### Short report of the 2008 Cultural Studies Workshop organised by CSSS, Calcutta in association with SEPHIS



**Martin Aranguren**

Martin Aranguren was born in 1981 in Mendoza, Argentina. He studied sociology in Universidad Nacional de Cuyo (Argentina), political science in the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Lille (France) and philosophy in Leipzig Universität (Germany). He did his Master's at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales-Paris (France) and completed the Research Training Programme of the Center for Studies in Social Sciences-Calcutta (India) with a SEPHIS scholarship. By the end of 2008 he will begin his Ph. D. at Ecole. Apart from his academic interests, he likes playing the guitar, especially the tango and other Latin American styles.

The Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSS) in collaboration with SEPHIS held its thirteenth annual Cultural Studies Workshop from 5 to 10 February 2008 in Pune, India. The theme of this year's workshop, *Culture and Economic Life*, was meant to renew the discussion on the connection between economic and social-cultural practices that had been constitutive of Cultural Studies as a field of research and writing. It is in the interest of making these categories operational for the present situation of technological and cultural globalisation that a re-examination of the discussion proved to be an urgent task.

The days were divided into morning (9 am-12 pm), noon (12 pm-1 pm) and afternoon sessions (2 pm-5/6 pm). In the morning sessions, two resource persons presented forty-minute long commentaries on the readings of the day and an open discussion followed. Noon and afternoon sessions were devoted to students' presentations. Each participant was allotted one hour for the discussion of his or her paper, of which the first third was meant for the presentation, the following twenty minutes were reserved to a discussant from the resource persons, and the final section was open for interventions from the hall. However, there were exceptions to this structure. Day two was divided into four sessions, instead of three. The exceptional evening session took place in a nearby restaurant, where the outstanding variety and delight of Indian curries and snacks was widely acknowledged, continuously appreciated and only interruptedly (and often unintelligibly) commented on. Day four, the free day, contained no sessions and was therefore undivided (or rather "objectively" undivided; one could divide the day in as many stretches as one pleased!).

Day One's texts revolved around the theme "Cultural Studies and the Question of the Economy". In the morning session Janaki Nair, the Coordinator of the workshop, chaired the panel whereas Partha Chatterjee and Neeladri Bhattacharya took charge of the discussion of the readings. In the noon session Mohammad Maljoo from Iran opened the students' presentations with a paper on the changing place of the economy in his country. In the afternoon session Mythri Prasad talked about internal labour

migration as a result of infrastructural expansion in Kerala, followed by Athikho Kaisi's presentation on globalisation and its effects on north-eastern tribal communities (discussed by Bodhisattva Kar).

Sibaji Bandyopadhyay chaired the panel on the second day, which had Partha Chatterjee and Madhava Prasad as discussants on "Commodities, Circulation and Regulation" in the morning session, and Aarti Seth as presenter in the noon session on the topic of cinema in post-partition India. In the afternoon Isaac Adeniran from Nigeria talked about the subculture of the Yahooboy in Lagos (discussed by Preben Kaarsholm from Denmark), followed by Abhishek Mitra's paper on the changing cityscape of Kolkata, and later on by Parvati Chandran's discussion on films as cultural commodities in contemporary Tamil Nadu.

"Cultural Politics of Class" was the theme of the third day. Madhava Prasad chaired the panel and the readings were discussed in the morning session by Praveena Kodoth and Manas Ray. In the noon session, Tathagathan began the series of students' presentations with a discussion on the Latin American indigenous movement, and after lunch Baishaki Bhattacharya and Amrit Sen presented their papers, which dealt with class-differentiated perceptions of responsibility in a Bengali novel and club football in the age of globalisation respectively. The following day was free, and some participants and resource persons went on a tour of Pune's architectural attractions and historical sites. Others enjoyed the pleasures of subjective time allocation.

Day Four (i.e. the fourth working day) dealt with "Cultural Production and Consumption", and Udaya Kumar and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay discussed the readings of the morning session in a panel chaired by Pradip Kumar Datta. In the noon session, Sriporn Somboonboorana discussed the results of her ethnography on Burmese migrant labourers in Thailand—her country. Bikash Nath opened the afternoon session with a historical account on the culture of protest in 1920s Assam, followed by Debojyoti Das' paper on the political ecology of coalmines in Meghalaya. Then Martin Aranguren from Argentina presented a study on strategic uses of

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information by an Indian Human Rights NGO and finally Madhuri Dixit discussed her case study on the relationship between creativity and economic compulsions.

The last day dealt with the theme "Capital and the Challenges to the Community". Amita Baviskar and Anjan Ghosh discussed the readings in the morning session, and Partha Chatterjee was the chair of the panel. In the noon session, Rajesh Kumar closed the list of students' presentations with a paper on the commoditisation of rituals in Kerala, after which the afternoon session was devoted to a collective evaluation of the overall workshop.

Throughout the workshop, the atmosphere was friendly and the resource persons were accessible not only during the *intermezzo* tea breaks but also in a myriad of other non-formal situations. The evaluation of the last day gave everyone the chance to speak out his or her perception of the workshop, and the session witnessed an interesting discussion on how to overcome a set of limitations— which in the panel's view represented recurrent issues year

after year. In general, the identified problems bear some relation to the very nature of Cultural Studies, a field of enquiry born of the convergence of a variety of disciplines and characterised by a largely theoretical use of empirical materials. Consequently, some participants suggested putting the teaching component of the workshop to the service of methodological pedagogy, and others expressed their discomfort in dealing with unfamiliar and therefore hardly accessible texts (in which they included not only the readings, but also other students' papers). The panel also took note of some methodological suggestions directed to the goal of enhancing the participation of the students.

The overall impression was largely positive, and there was a shared sense among the participants that the logistically impeccable workshop had provided a highly valuable occasion for discussing one's work, interacting with the resource persons, and acquiring more (or some) exposure to the expanding field of Cultural Studies.

## Across the south

### A Reflection on Citizenship Spaces: A View from Mexico



**Alejandra Galindo Marines**

Alejandra, a Mexican scholar, completed her Ph. D. from Centre for Middle East and Islamic Studies, University of Durham, U.K. in 2001. She is currently a full time lecturer at the Universidad de Monterrey, Mexico. Her main research interests focuses on the process of democratisation in the Gulf area. A SEPHIS grant holder in 2006-2007, Alejandra is pursuing a research project on "Gender and Citizenship in Saudi Arabia".  
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The seminar, "Reconfiguring the Spaces of Citizenship: Women and Gender"<sup>1</sup> provided a space for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and academics to dialogue on four axes: An examination of women's participation in the articulation of a conception of citizenship through their practices and discourses, the work of NGOs in the definition of sexual and reproductive rights, the analysis of public policies and the formal participation of women at municipal level and in labour unions.

The first two presentations were on the evaluation of women's participation in formulating citizenship demands. One focused on women's movements in Mexico, and the second on women's participation in Saudi Arabia. Both papers highlighted the issue that there is no universal conception of citizenship, and that one has to look at cases from South countries to understand the different patterns that citizenship can produce. The first paper presented by Gisela Espinosa evaluated the social movements regarding gender equality and feminism in Mexico. She found that despite the differences among movements, they coincide in the demands of gender equality either as feminist movements or as citizenship movements. The problem that emerged was not the great divide between tradition and modernity as it is often portrayed in the dominant Western conception of citizenship, but the use of tradition to fight inequality. This highlighted a differentiated conception, and strategies used by women's movements in Mexico. In the second paper, Alejandra Galindo analysed how Saudi women have been able to articulate demands and open up spaces for their participation in Saudi society. In contrast to Mexico, the organisation of women there is a relatively recent phenomenon. But what makes this case interesting is the use of tradition to contest the boundaries imposed

by the state, and simultaneously, the articulation of modernisation to advance their demands.

The second session highlighted the importance of sexual identity in the conception of citizenship and the practices around depenalised abortion in Mexico City. The first paper presented by Isabel Saro shared the experience of an NGO working with young people on the issue of sexual education, where the issue of identity shows the necessity of re-evaluating sexual and reproductive rights. The second paper by Ana Amuchástegui highlighted the problems in Mexico City regarding the newly legalised practice of abortion. She found the availability of doctors able to practice abortion was influenced by structural limitations and political and social consequences thereof, especially where the influence of anti-abortion groups is growing.

The third session of the seminar showed how women participating in politics, either as participants in the local government system or in the labour unions, face institutionalised discrimination. The session also highlighted the social dynamics accompanying their attempts to be heard and be visible. In the first paper, two NGO practitioners, Dalia Barrera and Irma Aguirre, focused on gender equality in public policies at municipal level. They found that these fora represent the hard beginning of politics, since men are not willing to relinquish control in terms of party politics or social and cultural practices. The problem of violence against women either inside the family or socially speaking has been a recurrent problem. This goes hand in hand with the lack of a gendered vision to promote public policies that empower women. Furthermore, the lack of political and economic support makes it difficult to create spaces for women to participate in as citizens, independent of the clientele policies prevalent in

<sup>1</sup> This seminar celebrated the twenty fifth anniversary of the first academic programmes on women and gender studies in México, "Programa Interdisciplinario de Estudios de la Mujer" (PIEM) by El Colegio de México and Especialización/Maestría en Estudios de la Mujer from Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Xochimilco (UAM-X). It was held on the 15 and 16 of November last year in Mexico City, at the two institutions. I want to thank members of the organising committee: Mercedes Barquet (PIEM-Colmex), Ana Lau Jaiven (UAM-X) and Mónica Cejas (UAM-X).



## Across the south

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Mexico. The work of Margarita Dalton showed the problems women faced in municipal government in the state of Oaxaca. She showed how difficult it was for women in municipal towns to become mayors. The women in these cases were entering male dominated spaces, usually without any political experience or networks, and their difficulty in negotiating issues, while also often facing violence. The women were judged not only in terms of the results they garnered as mayors, but also as women in terms of their behaviour.

The Federal Deputy, Rosario Ortíz, and NGO practitioner, Inés González, presented a paper on women's participation in syndicates or labour unions. Both of them have leading positions in syndicates. As in the previous panel, both presenters agreed that the spaces for women in the unions remain small. But they stated that some progress has been made, although it may neither be visible nor enough. Inés González pointed out that nowadays there is a significant increase in women participating in the workforce. Despite comprising approximately half the total workforce, this has not been translated into an increase in positions for

women in the decision-making bodies within the syndicates. Both speakers emphasised the present juncture where a decrease in labour rights and conditions is happening. Therefore, women in these spaces are facing twin discriminations. Firstly, for being women within their own committees, and secondly, for belonging to a particular class vis-à-vis the employer. As Rosario Ortíz remarked, women's demands are being diluted by men who insist on subordinating their needs to the 'general' demands. Consequently, women need to build alliances with other groups, not only in terms of labour unions but also with feminist organisations, in order to be able to negotiate the transversality of gender and aim for affirmative policies.

This seminar showed the importance of a constant dialogue between academics and practitioners. In each case the necessity of those spaces was highlighted by the commentators and the presenters. Sharing experiences in terms of objects of study, methodologies and realities that women face, enable the participants to see how women reconfigure their own spaces of citizenship.

## Experience of Field Work in Saudi Arabia



**Alejandra Galindo Marines**

My research in Saudi Arabia, which lasted for three months, focused on gender and citizenship, exploring the strategies that women are adopting to advance their demands in recent years. I am thankful to the King Faisal Centre for Islamic Studies, for kindly providing a space and help to conduct my research. This was actually my second trip to Saudi Arabia; the first being in 1999, while conducting fieldwork for my Ph. D. Here, I will focus on the strategies and perceptions of a Mexican woman doing research in Saudi Arabia.

The main research goal was to conduct interviews, especially of women who have been engaging in public activity in Saudi society. I targeted women who had attempted to participate in municipal elections; women who had published newspaper articles about the condition of women; and women who had participated in the third national dialogue on the role of women. I also interviewed people who held public office on issues related to women; religious men, lawyers etc. In the beginning, as is common in any field work, it took some time to reach the targeted people. I found it helpful to attend social gatherings where women spoke about their frustrations of being the target of western curiosity regarding their efforts. One has to understand that beside journalists covering the day to day events, Saudi Arabia has only recently been open to researchers, and especially women. It is not uncommon for women to have had bad experiences with western journalists, who focus on sensationalist reports and miss the context of the interviews and the topics that affect women. Other women said that it was always good to have the interest of the media and academics on the issue of women and gender, since this would allow them to be heard outside the country.

Taking into consideration this context, some women were reluctant to talk, though they were the exceptions. This usually happened with conservative women who are the leaders of some groups, despite my efforts to contact them through their relatives or close friends. Here, I have to say that an additional reason maybe because some conservative groups are being targeted by the government and these

women were afraid of the consequences. Most of the Saudi women were open to the research I was conducting, as well as the methodology I was using to follow their life stories. The meetings were long, and some times I was able to visit some women several times. Understanding how women have become aware of their role and the ways in which they face their situation was crucial to my research. At the same time, it helped to identify common features in the women's profiles. How women were socialised and what was their perception of their own life was, in a number of ways, similar to the attitudes Mexican women faced in the past and continue to face at the local level. Women were surprised to find a Mexican researcher interested in Saudi Arabia. There were two motivations behind their willingness to talk. One, it is always easier to talk to stranger from a different society; and two, because I sought to establish links between my own social reality and theirs. In this regard, I think that focusing on the similarities rather than the differences helped to establish a congenial atmosphere during the interview.

I conducted interviews in several cities in Saudi Arabia—Dahran, Al Khobar, Dammam (all three in the Eastern Province), Riyadh and Jeddah. My impression is that the three cities of the Eastern Province form a close community. The women knew each other and I found it easy to establish a network of contacts since people were very helpful and keen to be interviewed. The environment also was different to Riyadh where you can see more religious police around, whereas, in the Eastern Province and Jeddah their presence is not obvious. In these places, I was able to interview women who had attempted to participate in municipal elections; others who had participated in the elections for the Boards of the Chambers of Commerce, advisers to the Consultative Council; and women working as journalists. Some of the women I met knew other leading women either because they had been in touch electronically or had read articles written by women whom I had previously interviewed. As elsewhere in the world, computer facilities have become a tool to organise activities and to bring people closer

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together despite the difficulties women face in moving inside the kingdom.

To sum up, this experience was rich, challenging and deeply moving as I came to know the struggles women face daily despite the considerable personal and professional costs involved. I just want to thank SEPHIS for providing the space and means to exchange views across the Global South, since we have much common ground that enriches our perspectives, enabling our evaluation and rethinking of hegemonic discourses on gender.



## Breaking Through the Labyrinths...



**Nilanjana Bhattacharya**

Nilanjana is a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, India. She is doing her Ph. D. on the literatures of India and the Americas with special focus on mythification and feminist historiography.

In August 2007, I went to México City to spend an academic year in El Colegio de México, thanks to a fellowship sponsored by SEPHIS. It had truly been an eventful and memorable year of my life, and this would be an attempt to pen down a few glimpses of the exciting time that I spent there as a visiting student-researcher.



**El Palacio de Bellas Artes: The Art Museum in Mexico City**

As a student of Latin American Literature, it was one of my long-cherished ambitions to visit a Latin American country. So naturally I received the offer letter of the fellowship with a dream-come-true amazement. And it was probably this enthusiastic amazement that, coupled with the efforts of SEPHIS and El Colegio de México, helped me to steer through the crucial and labyrinthine bureaucratic procedures to finally set foot on that beautiful country. And throughout this lengthy and abysmal process, whenever my zeal was about to drain out, Kavita's (my Ph. D. supervisor, Dr. Kavita Panjabi) constant encouragement and insistence served as tonics. I would skip a detailed account of these procedures for two main reasons— firstly, not to make this article a novel, and secondly, not to scare off the readers. So readers, let me take you straight to El Colegio de México.

In Mexico, El Colegio de México is popularly known as Colmex. It is one of the most important academic institutions of México, dedicated to advanced studies and research in the field of humanities and social sciences. The building, with a remarkable architecture and stern security system, was located near one of the numerous volcanoes of México, called Ajusco. Although the entire building was quite

beautiful, the place I liked most in Colmex was the huge and cosy library. At the back of the library there is a glass wall looking out to a beautiful lawn— a really soothing vision in that all-concrete building. Apart from a very good collection of books and theses, the library also had a lot of electronic resources and an effective system of Inter-Library Loan to facilitate research and study programmes.

Colmex boasted a strong faculty. During my stay there, I had the opportunity to work closely with some of the professors who were ever so helpful and warm. Dr. Luz Elena Gutiérrez de Velasco was assigned as my research supervisor in México. In my first semester I took a course on Mexican Literature coordinated by Dr. Gutierrez. This helped me 'discover' a lot of very important Mexican authors, who otherwise would have remained unknown to me, because they had not been translated into English. (And it was extremely difficult to find books in Spanish in India.) Although Dr. Gutierrez was a professor of Mexican Literature, (from what I had seen, Comparative Literature was not a popular practice in México.) her interest in Indian Literatures was really surprising. We used to meet once in every fortnight to discuss my work, and during these meetings we talked about both Latin American and Indian Literatures, sometimes moving far beyond the contours of my work. In connection to Dr. Gutierrez, I should also mention one of her colleagues, Dr. Elizabeth Corral. I met her during a field trip to the Universidad Veracruzana in Xalapa where she was a professor, and her generous and kind praise of my Spanish gave my confidence a great boost.



**A View of Mexico City from the castle of Chapultepec**



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Professor Mercedes Arizpe was another person I shall never be able to forget. This elderly and affectionate professor taught me Spanish. The language sessions gave us plenty of opportunities to discuss literatures and cultures, which we enjoyed greatly. Incidentally, she also gave me a taste of another imperative aspect of México, namely, its cuisine. My mortal grief of not being able to eat Bengali curry was consoled a lot by delicious Méxican dishes. On hearing this, Professor Arizpe once invited me to a famous, traditional Méxican restaurant to indulge my taste buds. Within a few months of my arrival, I was head over heels in love with Méxican food. By the way, Colmex also had a huge subsidised cafeteria where students and staff members could eat at an exceptionally cheap rate. But the food was, according to one of my friends, too healthy to be tasty!



**The central plaza in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas**

Another wonderful experience had been the course that I took under Dr. Karine Tinat. It was a course in the Women's Studies programme (Programa Interdisciplinario de Estudios de la Mujer). But as there were students from various disciplines the course had truly been inter-disciplinary, and Dr. Tinat had the amazing ability to smoothly cross the disciplinary boundaries. She also used to tell us a lot of apparently funny anecdotes, actually demonstrating how to relate theory with practice.



**Chichen-Itza: A Wonder of the World**

I was lucky to find two compatriots in Colmex, Dr. Ishita Banerjee and Dr. Saurabh Dube. They are both professors in Centro de Estudios de Asia y Africa (Centre for Asian and African Studies). But for me, meeting Ishitadi (Dr. Banerjee) was almost like finding an older

sister and a friend abroad, rather than a professor. Throughout the year she had helped me out with thousands of things, right from assisting me to open a bank account to lending me Bengali spices for cooking.

Although I had heard and read a lot about the beauty of México, it took me quite some time to appreciate that. I arrived in México City after more than forty eight hours of journey, on a drizzling dusk. The chilly wind did nothing to lighten my heavy heart, which then, forgetting all its previous enthusiasm, saw nothing but a grim prospect of loneliness and separation. Needless to add that the high altitude would only make things worse for one who had spent her entire life in the plains of the Ganges. But gradually as I adjusted myself to all these changes, the place revealed to me its various aspects. The city stunned me with its mammoth size, incredible traffic, its spectacular mountainous skyline, the ever unpredictable weather, and an extraordinary cultural heritage. Before I set foot in México, I was very consciously prepared to accept and understand a different culture. Needless to say that there indeed were a lot of differences between the Indian and the Méxican cultures, but never did I dream of finding such striking resemblances between two countries separated by almost half a world. Apart from a wide range of flora, I realised that we also shared a lot of cultural similarities. I found these similarities while visiting the archaeological ruins of México, as well as in their food, festivities and art forms; including a few thrilling discoveries– that not only me, but my Méxican friends also found equally thrilling– like the similarity between 'tortilla' and 'chapati', or the fact that the Mayan rain god, Chaac, had an elephant trunk for a nose.

However, I found the most interesting aspect of México among its people. On my way to México, in the flight, I had my seat between two Méxican women. They were extremely amiable and helpful, like average Méxicans, but they warned me about a lot of troubles that people, especially foreigners and women– incidentally I happened to be both– face in México. On arriving in México, the warning was reiterated by my host family and then a few members of the administrative staff of Colmex. I should not go as far as to say that this foreboding was baseless, but I must admit that my stay in México gave me a very positive impression of the people there. Not that I never came across a few bad apples, but most of the people that I met during my stay were jovial and gay, and were always ready to help others.

I had the good fortune to come across a lot of very sincere and loving friends who helped me in thousands of ways and had actually made it possible for me to survive through the year. They helped me to find rare books and CDs as

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well as Indian restaurants, which are indeed few and far between in that colossal city, to travel in and outside México City, and above all to confront my loneliness in a foreign country. In fact, they almost made me forget the fact that I was a foreigner there. But, what I found most astonishing was the warm and friendly attitude of most of the people on the street.

On a number of occasions I was accompanied by complete strangers in my search for a particular street or number. They enjoyed chatting and I was rather surprised to see their curiosity about India. On the one hand there was this shopkeeper who, on hearing I am an Indian, asked me whether India was farther than Argentina (I could not help mentioning in this context that in México I comprehended the full magnitude of the blunder that Columbus committed...); on the other hand, once a taxi driver recognised me as an Indian by my dress (I was wearing a *Salwar Kameez*) and delightfully recounted his experience of bathing in the Ganges, and visiting the Taj Mahal. This time I was really taken aback for, in general, wearing Indian dresses had earned me queer looks on the streets. I was also surprised by people's curiosity about *bindi*. In one year I faced more questions about *bindi*, than any other thing. One day while I was standing in a counter in UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, The National Autonomous University of México) a person— a complete stranger to me— happened to have a glance at my passport and very politely asked me about the significance of *bindi*. And it was not a stray incident. In México I learnt a bunch of extraordinary theories regarding the *bindi*, which— being an Indian— I never heard before.



**Me and a skeleton in UNAM on the Day of the Deads (Courtesy G.A Lopez)**



**Dia de los muertos: Celebration of the Day of the Deads in UNAM (Courtesy G.A Lopez)**

Throughout my stay in México, my primary goal was to know the Mexican cultures directly and as vividly as possible. For that I had utilised every single chance to interact with the Mexicans— be it scholars or the common people. And the knowledge that I acquired thus was, to a large extent, different from the knowledge that I had gathered so far. And this was where I think SEPHIS played a very important role. It was actually facilitating a direct south-south dialogue by opening up our scope of interacting directly with each other, instead of a mediated dialogue through another country/culture, which had generally been the case so far. For instance, I had already mentioned about the wonderful experience of coming across a set of completely unknown authors. In fact, the popular idea of Latin American Literatures and cultures in India was highly fragmented, (and similarly the idea of Indian Literatures in México) because the books that were available in the Indian market were mostly books that had been translated into English or some Indian language(s). And sometimes the translations into the Indian languages were done from the English translation only. But there were a vast number of books— probably not that popular, but undoubtedly very important— that had not been translated. My stay in México helped me to 'discover' this less-popular side to get a more profound and inclusive view of Latin American Literatures and cultures. By emphasising on a direct south-south exchange, SEPHIS actually backed our chances to get to know each other more closely, to communicate with each other directly, and break through the "labyrinths of solitude".

## Book Review

## Shopping Bodies in a Global Market: India and the IT Industry



Samita Sen

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**Xiang Baio, *Global Body Shopping. An Indian Labour System in the Information Technology Industry*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2007, pp. 181. ISBN 978-0-691-11851-2 Price: na**



Have you wondered how the dream of a new India powered by IT reconciles with the story of an upward spiral of the dowry system? Xiang Biao's new book on Global Body Shopping explores these and other seemingly unrelated links in an ethnography that is remarkable for meticulous research, mastery of details and understanding of the structures and processes of the industry. The book focuses on Hyderabad (India) and Sydney (Australia) during the years 2000 and 2001. The author styles the work a 'global ethnology', because it seeks to examine not only transnational flows of labour but also interconnections between diverse and spatially distant regions. The book moves beyond and behind the clichés of mobility of capital, now so common in understandings of globalisation, to look at the structures of inequality— among as well as within— societies still overwhelmingly bounded by the political contours of the nation-state. The author achieves this by according a centrality to labour. This is an achievement of some note, given that the public discourse about the New Economy and its crucial underpinning, the IT sector, is so devoid of discussions about the actual processes of mobilisation of labour. And yet, it is a vast labour force that is India's unique contribution to global IT. The conditions of production of this new kind of labour and new forms of surplus appropriation intimately connects, the author argues, the hi-tech hub of the "Silicon Valley" of Palo Alto (northern California, USA) to women and children in rural India.

Contrary to popular perception, software development is highly labour intensive. Those at the bottom of this highly stratified industry are required to do tedious, unrelentingly monotonous

and low paying work. These operators, often termed 'consultants' or 'professionals' within the industry provide the bodies in the assembly lines newly fashioned for the needs of IT. The recruitment of these workers is thus called body shopping, while the terms used for senior IT 'professionals' is called head-hunting. The difference between the structure of recruitment and employment between the head and the body reflects the highly skewed internal economy of the industry. The author thus prefers to call the 'bodies' IT workers rather than consultants or professionals. Most of the Indian IT workers migrating are 'bodies' and their recruitment is handled by 'body shops'. The term first surfaced in 1974 with the establishment of Tata Consultancy Services in Mumbai. This was India's first export-oriented software services company. This and other such officially-endorsed companies worked by sending their staff abroad to provide on-site software services to overseas clients. The workers earned an overseas allowance on top of their salaries and on completion of the overseas project returned to their regular employment. A new practice emerged in the 1990s. This was a uniquely Indian practice, a global labour management system. Indian-run consultancies anywhere in the world recruit IT workers in most cases from India to be placed out as project-based labour with different clients. Unlike conventional labour recruitment agents who introduce employees to employers, body shops manage workers on behalf of the employers— from sponsoring their temporary work visas to paying their salaries, arranging for accommodation and the like. Thus, workers do not enter into any direct relationship with their contract employers and can be re-



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trenched at any time, whereupon the body shop sponsor either is able to place them out to a different client or puts them on the bench to await placement. Acting in association, body-shop operators link up with each other in the same region or in different countries, sending IT workers to where they are required. Given that getting migrants across national borders is an essential part of the body shops' function, they often operate in less than scrupulous and even clandestine ways. The bulk of the operations are informal, routed through a multi-layered network of agents. In order to work around immigration regulations, most body shops have to be hybrid operations which combine their function as labour brokers with software development and software-servicing. This allows their "bodies" to appear as employees being assigned to clients rather than being "shopped" in successive markets in diverse countries.

The decentralised character of body shopping, and the perceptions of reciprocal obligations underlying relationships between the bodies and the shoppers renders it largely invisible. It is, therefore, difficult to accurately estimate the size of this global business. According to the author, at any given time during 2000-2001, there were perhaps over one thousand agents specialising in supplying temporary Indian IT workers across the USA (hundreds being in northern California alone) managing as many as 20,000 IT workers. In Sydney (Australia) in late 2000, there were no less than 35 body shops managing more than 1000 Indian IT workers.

The details of the system are meticulously documented in the book, including the ways in which the networks of agents are integrated into the structures of the industry in different locations. The two most remarkable features of the system are the high degree of casualisation and, even more importantly, what drives this casualisation, the cheapening of IT workers. Casualisation is achieved through a practice termed 'benching'. This refers to the period between jobs when the workers are not paid anything at all, forcing the worker to bear the cost of market fluctuation. Moreover, even when there is a labour shortage, it is the chain of placement agents rather than the workers who reap the benefits. Each level of agency takes something off their salaries, thus creating a big gap between what the employer is willing to pay and what the workers usually earn.

What sustains this unequal and exploitative relationship? The crux of the explanation lies in Chapter Two of the book, which discusses the means of overproduction of IT people in Andhra Pradesh. Beginning his field work in Hyderabad, the so-called "epicenter of India's cyberquake", Biao noticed that the hype surrounding IT did not translate into actual IT business. Andhra

Pradesh's share of India's software export dropped from 9 to a little more than 5 per cent between 1994 and 1999 and the expected levels of foreign investment failed to materialise. The IT boom consisted not of IT businesses or even IT jobs, but of IT people. The primary article of export was not software or services, but workers. In order to achieve this, there was enormous investment in training for IT jobs and this process was fuelled by the possibilities of high salaries in foreign countries, that is to say, *Dollar Dreams*. There were three elements to this obsessive production of IT workers: The investment of agricultural surplus from better off districts of the Godavari and Krishna river deltas; the strategic use of dowry to pay for training and migration; and the mobilisation of family resources. These factors led to an overproduction of IT workers, which facilitated the global IT boom by cheapening the mass of its workers.

The author identifies three processes by which the system sustains itself: Ethnicisation, individualisation and transnationalisation. The edifice of body shopping is ethnicised as "Indian". Here Indian is homogenous and legitimised or justified by market logic—that Indians are simply the world's best at IT. This of course ignores the processes of class, caste and gender which have contributed to the production of IT workers. Also, importantly, this ethnicisation does not imply pre-existing closely-knit ethnic ties. Rather, the industry is permeated with competition, workers' individualist attitudes and meritocratic ideologies. These two seeming opposites—ethnicisation and individualisation—work together because of transnationalisation, indicating the institutional significance of body shopping. India's centrality in the business of production of IT workers has no established connection to 'Indian culture'. But Indians bearing the marks of this culture feel themselves able to transcend the limits of the nation-state as 'free' and global individuals. These precariously placed workers, endlessly nomadic in short-term projects and 'benched' between them—living with basic amenities in transnational dormitories—are the most numerous face of the industry. The ever-present possibility of better jobs, substantial savings and a place in the dollar economy continues to draw young men in the thousands into the pursuit of the glamorous world of global IT. They are not of course 'individuals' and the author establishes, with an acute insight, the ways in which women's and children's labour are harnessed into the process of producing cheap workers. The 'Indian Triangle' in the global industry is different from many other stories of growth—little wealth makes it way down from the global to the local economies, rather wealth is pumped 'both up-



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ward and outward'. You may if you wish argue over just how much the untouchable woman in village in India has contributed to the paradise found in Silicon Valley, but the terms of that debate cannot be turned over. The author confirms one of the strongest arguments in the anti-globalisation armour, that there is no 'trickle down'.

For a historian of labour the book is evocative at many levels. The arguments about casualisation, the ways in which costs of migration are passed on to workers, the gendering of the labour market through marriage strategies

and the multilayered brokerage system through which labour is mobilised on a large scale carry echoes from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before regulation and unionisation led to the formalisation of at least ten percent of India's manufacturing economy. Identifying persistent patterns must not, however, distract us from the very new processes at work in the case of the IT industry. This book must be read— not only by all social scientists, but by all those enthusiastic votaries and skeptical denouncers of IT as India's present and future.

## Book Notice

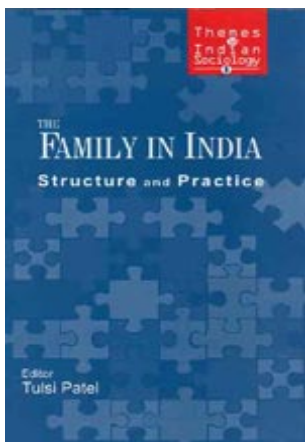
**N. Jayaram, S. L. Sharma, Yogesh Atal (eds.), *The Indian Diaspora: Dynamics of Migration*, Sage, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 255. ISBN 0761932186, 9780761932185**

The study of Indian diaspora has emerged as a rich and variegated area of multidisciplinary research interest. In fact there have appeared two parallel traditions of research and analysis: Literary and Social Scientific. In the latter category Historical, Anthropological and Sociological Perspectives have been particularly active. In the 1990s there appeared the structural perspective with its focus on the study of structural dimensions such as the elements of gender, caste and regional identities in the context of the Indian diaspora.

This volume brings together nine seminal articles by well-known scholars which deal with the empirical reality of Indian diaspora and the theoretical and methodological issues raised by it. Between them they cover a variety of important aspects such as social adjustment, family change, religion, language, ethnicity and culture.

<http://books.google.co.in/>

[books?id=LDRjfwTJgBMC&dq=the+indian+diaspora](http://books.google.co.in/books?id=LDRjfwTJgBMC&dq=the+indian+diaspora)

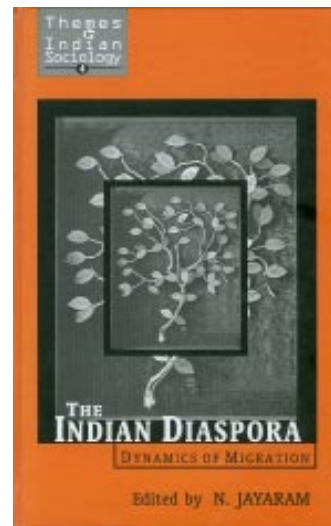


**Patricia Uberoi, Nandini Sundar, Satish Deshpande (eds.), *Anthropology in the East: Founders of Indian Sociology and Anthropology*, Seagull Books, New Delhi, 2008, pp. 568. ISBN 1905422776, 9781905422777**

Anthropology and sociology have long histories in India. Yet, with the exception of fieldwork experience, there is little research available on the institutional and material contexts of these disciplines or on the practices of pioneering anthropologists and sociologists. Filling this important gap, this book spans a century of life and work, from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century, and focuses on scholars with varying research trajectories. It shows how local influences and personalities played a major role in shaping the field and it examines their common concern with nation-building, social reform and the value of science.

<http://books.google.co.in/>

[books?id=NSFpIgAACAAJ&dq=anthropology+in+the+east](http://books.google.co.in/books?id=NSFpIgAACAAJ&dq=anthropology+in+the+east)



**Tulsi Patel, Pat Lsi, *The Family in India: Structure and Practice*, Sage, New Delhi, 2005, pp. 310. ISBN 0761933883, 9780761933885**

This timely book examines, in detail, the meaning of family in India. Inextricably linked to the institution of family are issues such as gender and sexual divisions, the role of the state, changing demographic patterns and a growing elderly population. The first part looks at the nature of the family as an institution. Part Two discusses the question of the myth or reality of the disintegration of the joint family. Finally, the last section includes case studies of structures of families in different parts of India.

[http://books.google.co.in/books?id=K-I\\_Ve\\_GKOIC&dq=the+family+in+india](http://books.google.co.in/books?id=K-I_Ve_GKOIC&dq=the+family+in+india)



## Book Notice



**Marco H. D. van Leeuwen (ed.), *Marriage Choices and Class Boundaries. Social Endogamy in History*, International Institute for Social History, The Netherlands, 2006, pp. 302.**

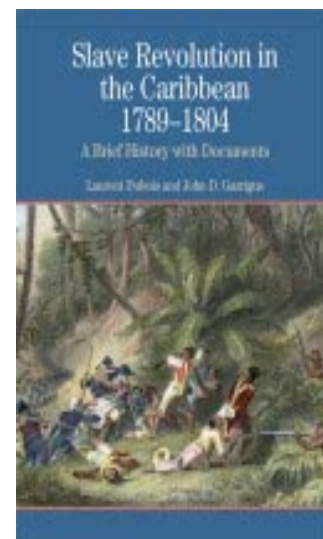
**ISBN-13: 9780521685467, 10: 052168546X**

Marriage choice plays a crucial role in the formation and decay of social classes. Endogamy, the custom forbidding marriage outside one's social class, is thus central to social history. The study considers the factors determining who married whom, whether partner selection has changed over time and regional differences between Europe and South America. The volume also questions to what extent these factors have changed over the past three hundred years. The case studies presented are preceded by a state-of-the-art theoretical introduction on the determinants influencing trends in social endogamy. Each contributor has employed the same social-class scheme and thus the volume is the first comparative study of social endogamy in an historical context.  
[http://books.google.co.in/books?id=Kmq\\_ZvICBnQC](http://books.google.co.in/books?id=Kmq_ZvICBnQC)

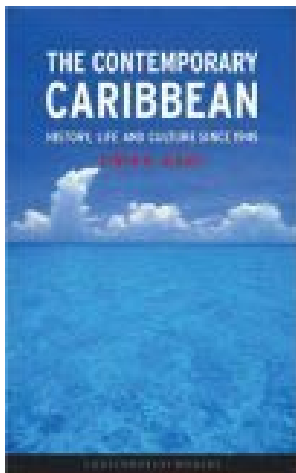
**Laurent Dubois, John D. Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2006, pp. 212. ISBN 031241501X, 9780312415013**

The Haitian Revolution was the first slave rebellion to have a successful outcome, leading to the establishment of Haiti as a free black republic and paving the way for the emancipation of slaves in the rest of the French Empire and the world. Incited by the French Revolution, the enslaved inhabitants of the French Caribbean began a series of revolts, and in 1791 plantation workers in Haiti, then known as Saint-Domingue, overwhelmed their planter owners and began to take control of the island. They achieved emancipation in 1794, and after successfully opposing Napoleonic forces eight years later, emerged as part of an independent nation in 1804. A broad selection of documents, all newly translated by the authors, is contextualised by a thorough introduction considering the very latest scholarship. Professors Dubois and Garrigus clarify for students the complex political, economic, and racial issues surrounding the revolution. Useful pedagogical tools include maps, illustrations, a chronology and a selected bibliography.

<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=HMKFtgACAAJ&q=slave+revolution+in+the+caribbean>



## Book Notice



**Olwyn M. Blouet, *The Contemporary Caribbean: History, Life and Culture Since 1945*, Reaktion Books, London, 2007, pp. 159. ISBN 1861893132, 9781861893130**

When Americans seek an escape from the worries and dilemmas of everyday life, the crystal blue waters and white sands of the Caribbean islands seem like the answer to a prayer. Yet this image of a tourist's paradise hides a tumultuous history marked by strife and division over race, political power, and economic inequality. Olwyn Blouet explores the story of "the Caribbean" over the last fifty years, revealing it to be a region positioned at the heart of some of the most prominent geopolitical issues of modern times.

Navigating a rich *mélange* of cultures and histories, Blouet unearths a complex narrative that is frequently overlooked in histories of the Americas. In stark contrast to widely-read guidebooks, this chronicle unflinchingly probes two strikingly different worlds in the Caribbean islands— those of the haves and the have-nots— created by the volatile mixture of colonial politics, racial segregation, and economic upheaval. The strategic political relations between Caribbean nations, Cuba in particular, and the world powers during the Cold War; the economic transformations instigated by tourism; and the modernising efforts of Caribbean nations in order to meet the demands of a globalising twenty-first century market are among the numerous issues explored by Blouet in her efforts to redress the historical record's imbalance.

The *Contemporary Caribbean* also explores the proud histories of the region's many nations in sports such as cricket and baseball, as well as their famed cuisines, and the uneasy balance today between local traditions and the vestiges of colonial influence.

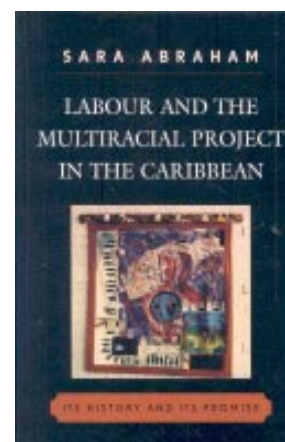
<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=dQXAAAAYAA&dq=the+contemporary+caribbean&pgs=1>

**Sara Abraham, *Labour and the Multiracial Project in the Caribbean: Its History and Its Promise*, Lexington Books, Lanham, MD, 2007, pp. 242.**

**ISBN 0739116851, 9780739116852**

The *Multiracial Project in the Caribbean* covers major twentieth-century political developments in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana. It pays particular attention to social movements, class formation, and new emancipatory ideas on liberation from colonial legacies in political structure and racial division.

<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=WFRdMhp8gEC&dq=labour+and+the+multiracial+project>





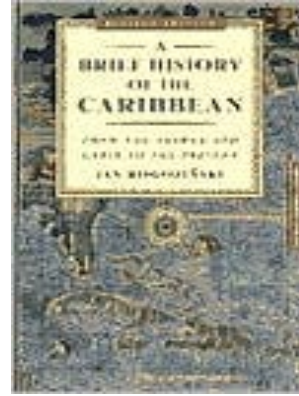
## Book Notice

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**Jan Rogozinski, *A Brief History of the Caribbean: From the Arawak and Carib to the Present*, Penguin Group (USA), 2000, pp. 432.**

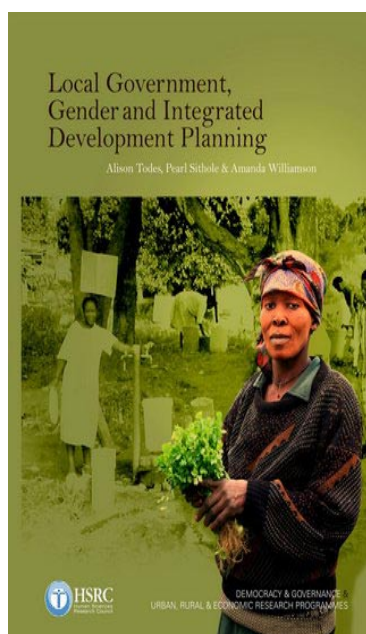
**ISBN 13: 9780452281936**

Since Columbus landed in the Bahamas 500 years ago, the history of the Caribbean has been marked by European domination and the ongoing struggle of both native and immigrant islanders for political and economic autonomy. Over the centuries, Spain, the Netherlands, France, Britain, and the United States have vied for sovereignty over the islands and their rich resources, and all have left their indelible mark on the peoples and cultures they touched. Taking this heritage into account, and beginning with the first known Caribbean islanders—the Arawak and the Carib—*A Brief History of the Caribbean* traces the complex and ever-changing course of events in the region, with in-depth coverage of the social, economic, and political factors that have shaped its history.



<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=pQ-0AAAACAAJ&dq=a+brief+history+of+the+caribbean>

## Book Notice



**Alison Todes, Pearl Sithole, Amanda Williamson, *Local Government, Gender and Integrated Development Planning*, HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2007, pp. 48. ISBN: 978-07969-2197-0**

Since 1994, local government in South Africa has become more important than ever before. It has been described as the 'hands and feet' of government, and is expected to play a key role in development. But to what extent does local government support women's empowerment and gender equity? Do integrated development plans (IDPs), which give strategic direction to the work of a municipality, benefit gender equity or women's rights?

These are the key issues discussed in *Local Government, Gender and Integrated Development Planning*. Authors Todes, Sithole and Williamson examine whether decentralisation is actually empowering women by making government closer and more accessible, or whether national gender policy directives are being ignored in IDP processes and outcomes. The monograph is based on a project carried out in KwaZulu-Natal over the period 2004-2006. It includes both an accessible, useful summary of research findings and recommendations for the future.

The monograph is intended to stimulate thinking and debate on how to promote women's rights and gender equality within the context of decentralisation, as well as within IDP and project processes. It is aimed at a wide audience, from gender advocates and activists, to municipal planners and councillors.

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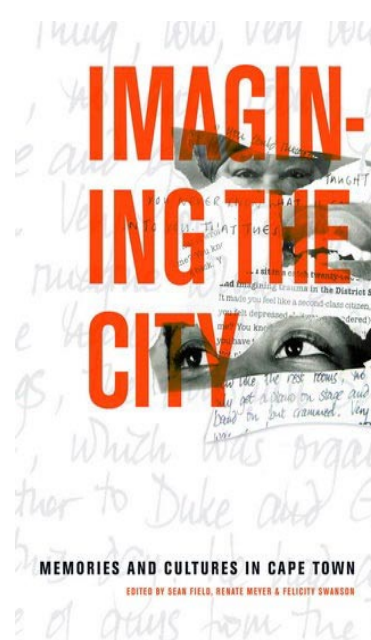
**Sean Field, Renate Meyer, Felicity Swanson (eds.), *Imagining the City. Memories and Cultures in Cape Town*, HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2007, pp. 248.**

**ISBN:**

Cities are not only made of buildings and roads, they are constructed through popular imagination and spaces of representation. This book presents an array of oral and visual histories drawn from people, who live, work and creatively express themselves in the city. It explores the apartheid legacies of the city and demonstrates that cultural life flourished through people's resilience in spite of adversity. Authors move beyond apartheid history to analyse the reflective ways in which people are coming to terms with that history through memory work, performance and memorialisation. Other chapters provide contemporary views of local interactions such as moments of urban violence or people negotiating the challenges of a globalised world.

Whatever the context, this book traces social and cultural interactions over time and across city spaces that speak directly to the senses, memories and imagining of Cape Town. *Imagining the City* makes an important contribution to public discourse about a vision for, and ownership of the city by affirming the memory of its inhabitants, and by hinting at the work that can, and should still be done in foregrounding memory and culture in the re-imagining of Cape Town as a city.

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## Book Notice

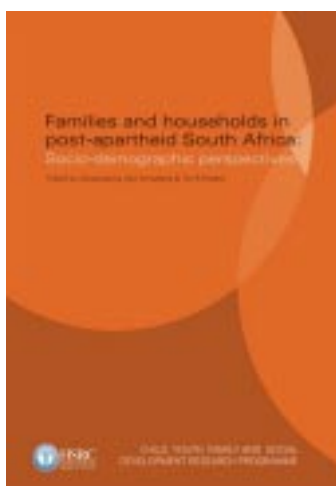
**Vishnu Padayachee (ed.), *The Development Decade? Economic and Social Change in South Africa, 1994-2004*, HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2006, pp. 484.**

**ISBN: 978-07969-2123-9**

Covering a breadth of issues, the international development specialists who have contributed to this volume significantly deepen our understanding of the key socio-economic issues in the first decade of South Africa's democratic Governance. Locating the South African challenges within a broader international perspective, the issues covered include all the major economic growth challenges confronting South Africa—employment, industrial policy, urban governance, the informal economy— and the social challenges of poverty, inequality, HIV/AIDS and health policy. The key development debates of the post-apartheid era are outlined and the success or otherwise of a decade of reform and experimentation is considered.

Contributors include leading American development economists Gill Hart and Michael Carter; respected African development scholar Dani Nabudere; noted British economist Jonathan Michie; and prominent South African scholars including Alan Whiteside, Julian May, Mike Morris, Francie Lund, Haroon Borhat, Adam Habib, Eleanor Preston-Whyte, Bill Freund, Dale McKinley and Lungisile Ntsebeza.

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**Acheampong Yaw Amoateng, Tim B Heaton, *Families and Households in Post-apartheid South Africa. Socio-demographic Perspectives*, HSRC Press, Cape Town, 2007, pp. 248.**

**ISBN: 978-07969-2190-1**

We know that the structures of families and of households have changed in recent decades and that this has had a profound affect on public policy planning and service delivery in South Africa. The institution of the family interfaces with other social institutions in any society— it therefore stands to reason that the political, social and economic transformations resulting through colonialism and apartheid in South Africa have affected families and their residential dimension, the household, for all cultural groups.

Prior to the democratic transition in 1994, studies of families and households were limited by the political economy of apartheid in general, and more specifically, by inadequate quantitative socio-economic data. Since the transition however, the proliferation of such data has largely overcome this problem, making it possible to undertake more representative, comprehensive studies than was the case in the past.

In this research monograph, a group of well-established social scientists from such diverse disciplines as economics, demography, sociology and psychology attempt to explain the myriad changes in families and households in South Africa following the end of apartheid.

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