

Radical Convergence: Critical Geographies of South Asia

This four day workshop was organized at the Sambhaavnaa Institute in Village Kandbari, District Kangra, Himachal Pradesh between 26-29 June, 2015. The co-organizers of the workshop were Dr. Anu Sabhlok from the Indian Institute for Science Education and Research (IISER) Mohali, and Dr. Rohit Negi from Ambedkar University, Delhi. The goal of the workshop was to bring academics and activists to discuss various aspects of the larger political economic context, as well to brainstorm on creative collaborative possibilities between the two groups.

A total of 26 scholar-activists participated in the workshop. These included five faculty members from various institutions (IISER, AUD, Nanyang Technical University, SPA-Delhi, ex-DU), sixteen currently enrolled PhD students (from IISER, AUD, DU, Minnesota, Copenhagen, Panjab University, London School of Economics), and five full-time activists/researchers. In addition, members of the Himdhara Collective and Sambhaavnaa Institute also participated in the workshop.

The workshop was divided into various sessions, with each being led/facilitated by a small group. The details of the programme were as follows:

6/26/2015	6/27/2015	6/28/2015	6/29/2015
Welcome and Introductions (Rohit, Anu, Sambhaavnaa)	Debates in Political Ecology (Anindita, Jennifer, Rohit)	Debates in Feminist Geography (Dalia, Preetika, Gaurav)	Deconstructing Capitalism (Anindita, Shoaib, Rohit)
Straddling the Scholar-Activist Divide (Anu, Budha, Kanchan)	Doing Political Ecological Research (Matt, Rashmi)	Feminist Methodologies (Anu, Kanchan, Bani)	Imagining Alternative Futures (Anu, Navneet, Persis)
Political and Economic Changes in S.Asia (Amandeep, David, Marjorie)	Development and Environmental Politics in Himachal (Manshi, Prakash, Kesang)	Gendered Social Relations in S. Asia (Marjorie, Budha, Ganeshwari)	Everyday Lives and Political Landscapes in South Asian Cities (Jennifer, Shilpa, David)
Towards Engaged and Responsible Research (Bani, Yogesh, Vivek)	Modes of Outreach and Dissemination (David, Matt, Shilpa)	The Arts and Progressive Social Change (Carlo, Persis)	Feedback and Brainstorming on Road Map (Anu, Rohit)

The workshop opened with introductions and expectations of the various participants. Thereafter, a session on ‘Straddling the Scholar Activist Divide’ brought into relief the challenges but also opportunities to work across the academia/activism divide, including various models of productive interface. The next session invited participants to collectively meditate on the shifts in the larger political economy as it relates to the Indian university system and the world of activist and advocacy organizations, in order to find overlaps and dissonances. Participants were divided into four groups for this purpose and each later graphically presented their findings, which were put up on the walls for the subsequent days for feedback. The final session delved into the question of ‘engaged research’, that is, building relationships in the field through ethical means and sustaining them after the end of the formal research. Too often, both academic and advocacy related research is sporadic and extractive, and scholar-activists must therefore find ways to

address the imbalances that emerge as a result of differential power dynamics. One way, as suggested, by a pre-circulated reading by Delgado and Habermahl, was to enumerate, plan and collaborate with different ‘publics’ at various stages of a project (preparation, fieldwork, dissemination), rather than only the final stage as is typically the case.

Day 2 was majorly devoted to discussions around ‘Political Ecology, which is one of the key themes within the larger sub-discipline of Critical Geography, and relates to, on the one hand, politicizing ecological concerns while also developing an ecological perspective to themes that are considered purely economic or development-centric. Facilitators of the first session made presentations on the emergence and trajectory of political ecology, before introducing some current debates amongst scholars, especially around climate change, the so-called ‘Anthropocene’ and possibilities of imagining post-human futures. A spirited debate followed, which centered around the question of ‘agency’, that is, whether only humans make history and if not—and if non-humans are active agents in shaping the world—then what ethics and responsibilities (especially for the past) emerge? The afternoon session was in some ways an extension of this debate, since the presentation by Himdhara members related to the contestations in HP around the construction of numerous dams. The speakers highlighted the role of dams in the state’s political economy, the negative consequences of these artifacts on the environmental fabric of several regions and the state of opposition. The final session of the day was in continuation to the final session of Day 1, and outlined different ways in which responsible and politically meaningful dissemination strategies can be developed for mutual benefit to researchers and ‘communities.

Day 3 was dedicated to understanding how power works in social relations at various scales. Particular emphasis was on gendered social relations and ethical issues related to doing research and activism were discussed. Theoretical perspectives from feminist geography were brought in to help understand the dynamics of social relations, particularly those in which we ourselves are embedded (as researchers, as teachers, as activists etc). In the afternoon, we experimented with feminist methodologies and each group performed a social situation that raised questions for both research and activism. The later part of the afternoon, also continued in the performative mood. A paragraph was read out from one of the readings and each group had to find a way to communicate the essence of this paragraph in a creative and simple manner. Responses ranged from crisp tweet messages to musical parodies. The idea behind this day was to enable participants to stretch the boundaries of our comfort zones and expand our notions of what counts as knowledge and how one can acquire it.

The **final day** involved a careful deconstruction of the notion of capitalism, by taking up concrete situations from diverse parts of India and teasing out the different relationships of capital, state, community and ecology in each. Rohit, Praveen and Anu discussed their reading of the ongoing changes in Himachal, Chhattisgarh and Chandigarh respectively, and thereafter a lively debate took place on the ways they are connected to each other and to the larger capitalist system. In each site the state works with different motivations and in partnership with diverse set of agents. The idea was to appreciate the work of capitalism as it manifests differently and therefore calls for strategies that are universally oriented but grounded in the immediate context. The afternoon session engaged with

these processes in cities, that is, the changing landscapes and political possibilities in urban areas given the operation of larger processes. The Slow City movement, Right to the City movement, and experiments in communal living were discussed in the session.

The final session of the workshop involved discussion around feedback to the workshop and ways forward for the collective. There was clear interest in continuing the work, which could take different forms, including a Summer Institute, training workshops, and a more directed effort to engage with activists. As it turned out, the workshop attracted a number of PhD candidates, rather than full-time activists, and this gave the event a slant towards more academic conversations. In part this was because of the fact that much of the organizing was last-minute and a strategy to target specific individuals and/or groups couldn't be devised. It was felt that separating out the twin motives—namely, pedagogical and collaborative across the academic/activist divide—was important going forward.

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Participants:

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1	Kanchan Gandhi	School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi
2	Shilpa Dahake	IISER, Mohali
3	Preetika Sharma	IISER, Mohali
4	Yogesh Mishra	IISER, Mohali
5	Dalia Bhattacharjee	IISER, Mohali
6	Navneet Kaur Gill	Panjab University
7	Amandeep Kaur	Panjab University
8	Anindita Chatterjee	University of Minnesota, USA
10	Persis Taraporevala	Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi
11	Vivek Tripathi	University of Delhi
12	Rashmi Singh	AUD
13	David Sadoway	Nanyang Technological University
14	Gaurav Sikka	University of Delhi
15	Ganeshwari	Panjab University
16	Jennifer Mateer	University of Victoria, Canada
17	Syed Shoaib Ali	Independent Researcher

18	Marjorie Fernandes	Independent Researcher
19	Budhaditya Das	AUD
21	Kesang Thakur	Himdhara
22	Carlo Ghidini	Independent Researcher
23	Matt Birkinshaw	London School of Economics
24	Ishita Sharma	Programme for Social Action, Delhi
25	Bani Gill	University of Copenhagen
26	Praveen Singh	Sambhaavnaa
27	Anu Sabhlok	IISER, Mohali
28	Rohit Negi	AUD