

South Asia Anthropologists Group (SAAG) annual conference

5-6 September 2018

St John's College, University of Oxford

Call for papers

Struggles for autonomy:

Caste, gender, indigenous, territorial, and religious movements in South Asia

We would like to invite the SAAG participants this year to explore the concept of autonomy as an ideal pursued by various movements throughout South Asia, whether they are based on caste, gender, indigeneity, territory, or religion. Subaltern groups such as Dalits, Adivasis, women, oppressed nationalities or religious groups have all expressed a will to reclaim their destinies from the control of dominant groups or the State. While building solidarities and alliances across social hierarchies, genders and ethnicities might be important for their success, these struggles have also tried to remain autonomous by making their own voices heard, rather than those of more powerful activists speaking in their name. Autonomy is thus both an end and a way of achieving this end. By emancipating themselves from external agents claiming to represent them, marginalized groups seek to avoid the appropriation of their movements.

For example, Dalit activists increasingly favour self-organisation and engage in anti-caste struggles by distancing themselves from Brahmins or other dominant castes, even when the latter claim to be progressive. The communist parties' revolutionary credentials have often been questioned when they carry out the fight for the oppressed while excluding the oppressed themselves from leadership positions (the representatives of the Left in India and Nepal are predominantly from upper-caste backgrounds). Ethnic politics in Nepal is often said to have been hijacked by indigenous elites, while the so-called Maoist revolution is said to have been betrayed by the erstwhile guerrilla leaders. The quest for autonomy has therefore resulted in what is sometimes described in a pejorative way as "identity politics". According to its critics, class is a more relevant category than caste, gender or ethnicity to analyse power. However, identity-based struggles for autonomy have expanded the narrow and economistic class-centric analyses of inequality, while demonstrating their radical potential as "liberation politics".

The right to self-determination is also asserted through territorial movements for autonomy that have taken various forms in South Asia, from mere redrawing of internal borders and administrative reorganisation such as the creation of Telangana, to more militant demands for freedom or independence in Kashmir, Nagaland, Baluchistan, Jaffna, as well as fierce debates about the future of ethnic federalism in post-conflict Nepal. These nationalist movements are sometimes analysed as anti-colonialist struggles seeking emancipation from State oppression. Similarly, indigenous movements for autonomy aim to avoid State control and capitalist exploitation of resource-rich Adivasi territories through forced "development" and industrialisation, in regions such as the forested areas of Central India or the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh.

Finally, we are not limiting the understanding of autonomy to the political domain. Persecuted religious minorities such as the Rohingyas leaving Burma for Bangladesh, lower caste and indigenous groups in India and Nepal converting to Christianity or Islam to escape the oppressive Hindu social hierarchy, people joining new religious movements outside the orthodox traditions, religiously inspired groups forming alternative communities and settlements could all help us to broaden the notion of autonomy and understand how people craft their personhood and struggle for dignity outside the dominant frameworks.

Deadline for proposals: 30 April 2018

Please send a title and abstract of *500 words* maximum to the organisers:

Dalel Benbabaali: dalel.benbabaali@gmail.com

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If selected, **full papers** will be due by **5 August 2018**.

Authors are not expected to present their papers during the conference as they will be pre-circulated among all participants. Discussants will sum them up, comment and ask questions, following which there will be a Q&A session with the audience.

The event is funded by St John's College and the Radhakrishnan Memorial Bequest. Food and accommodation for 2 nights at St John's College will be arranged for authors and discussants based outside Oxford, and requests for reimbursement of domestic travels will be considered.