EMPIRE AND (IM-)MOBILITY IN SOUTH AND SOUTHEAST ASIA, 19th & 20th CENTURIES

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Book of Abstracts (in order of participation)

Workshop Concept Note

This workshop organised by Siddharth Pandey and Harald Fischer-Tiné brings fresh and original perspectives on mobilities and immobilities created by/in the British and Dutch colonial empires in South and Southeast Asia. In fundamental ways, colonial empires were all about mobility. The functioning of the imperial military and administrative apparatus, the production of colonial knowledge, the economic extraction of local resources, the export of colonial commodities were all based on relentless movement and circulation. This circulation, in turn, relied heavily on the use of various mobility technologies as well as on the creation of mobility infrastructures. It also crucially depended on the spatial movement of segments of the colonized population and/or external labour forces, clerks and military personnel, scientific experts imported from the imperial metropole or other world regions. At the same time, however, imperial formations were at pains to restrict or suppress mobility. Thus, the ideal colonial subject was usually imagined as being sedentary and immobile, whereas 'subaltern mobilities' in general and the movements of potentially 'dangerous' population groups (such as nomads, 'criminal tribes', religious mendicants, diasporic anti-colonialists etc.) were seen as suspicious and in need of close monitoring.

In the spirit of Käte Hamburger Research Centre global dis:connect's (gd:c) double emphasis on connectivity and the absence thereof, this workshop wants to bring together scholars of history and neighbouring disciplines that provide fresh and original perspectives on mobilities and immobilities created by/in the British and Dutch colonial empires in South and Southeast Asia (and their respective global entanglements). The temporal focus may also be extended to the early postcolonial states that followed their collapse. While the ambiguities and tensions between forms of mobility and immobility and their relation to power may serve as a *leitmotif*, the focus of the individual contributions can be on the material, social, cultural, economic and political impact of particular transport technologies (steamships, railways, automobiles, bicycles, *tonga*s etc.) and the basic infrastructures (railway tracks, roads, docks) they required, as well on the movement of certain groups of historical actors on both sides − and beyond − the colonial divide (soldiers, sailors, scientists, 'peripatetic revolutionaries', tourists and 'globetrotters', etc.) and the measures to control and check their mobility (passports, border controls, creation of surveillance networks). Another area of interest lies in the literary and artistic representation of various mobility experiences in travelogues, guidebooks, novels or films.

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Philip Krauer

Beyond the Rails: The Transimperial Journey of the 'Java Bogie' in the 1920s

In 1927, the Great Indian Peninsula Railway Company ordered eleven locomotives from the Swiss Locomotive and Machine Works (SLM). The trains, developed in collaboration with Manchester-based electrical engineering company Metropolitan Vickers, were favoured over their competitors because they were equipped with a special bogie that allowed locomotives to travel at high speeds even on winding tracks. Designed by ETH-trained Swiss engineer and SLM director Jakob Buchli, this so-called 'Java bogie' had first been applied by the state-owned Dutch East Indies Railway Company (Electrische Staats Spoorwegen) on Java in 1924. After proving highly successful, it was subsequently adopted by the Swiss Federal Railways, which were themselves reliant on new mobility technologies during the electrification of their rail network and the associated increase in speed. While most studies on imperial railways follow the tracks of colonial railway lines and examine the history of their construction respectively their social or environmental impact, this paper focuses instead on the transfer of locomotive technologies beyond the rails. Tracing the global employment of the 'Java bogie', it moves beyond a diffusionist narrative of global modernity to explore how engineering knowledge circulated between different technological hubs in Europe, South- and Southeast Asia, transcending the borders of multiple colonial empires. By combining approaches from global history and science and technology studies, this paper argues that companies and technical universities from peripheral countries without colonial possessions also actively participated in shaping both colonial and non-colonial mobility regimes in the early twentieth century.

Philipp Krauer is a Senior Researcher in the project 'Engineering Empires from the Margins: Global Techno-Colonialism and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (c.1860–1980)' at ETH Zurich. He completed his PhD there in 2022 with a dissertation on Swiss mercenaries in the Dutch colonial army, published in 2024 as 'Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies: A Transimperial History of Military Labour'. Between 2021 and 2025, he also worked as an archivist at the State Archives of Schwyz and was affiliated with the University of Lausanne. His research connects imperial and labour history with science and technology studies.

Andreas Greiner

Negotiating Imperial Aviation: Interdependence, Rivalry, and Public Pressure in India, 1920s–1930s

This paper examines the diplomacy and debates that accompanied the development of imperial aviation networks in the Indian subcontinent during the 1920s and 1930s. As aircraft technology advanced, imperial governments sponsored airlines to connect European metropoles with their Asian territories. While a British route was established to India in 1929, with plans to later expand it to Hong Kong and Australia, planned Dutch and French routes also had to cross India. Because the legal principle of air sovereignty granted states control over their airspace, and thus the right to deny entry, the British government had substantial leverage in stalling foreign network growth. In history writing, the ensuing negotiations have been interpreted as manifestations of inter-imperial rivalry, highlighting British efforts to

block rival empires' routes. This paper takes a different approach, observing that, overt rivalries notwithstanding, by 1931 the airlines of the three empires were operating flights to and through India. As will be shown, two key factors made it impossible for the British to maintain a blockade stance: first, the geopolitical—and above all, geographical—realities of a world divided into empires, and second, the influence of public opinion in India. Negotiations among the British, Dutch, and French governments highlight the role of horizontal, bilateral transactions. Just as the Dutch KLM and France's Air Orient needed access to India, Britain also needed permission to fly over Dutch and French possessions in Southeast Asia. To cope with this involuntary interdependence, the different diplomatic missions mutually crafted a modus operandi of granting access rights. At the same time, India's merchant class and entrepreneurs increasingly called for better networks to strengthen business connections abroad. In this context, Britain's flag carrier, Imperial Airways—long criticized for its slow service—came to be seen as an inadequate instrument, and pressure grew to permit KLM and Air Orient to operate as well.

Andreas Greiner is a research fellow at the German Historical Institute Washington. His research specializes in infrastructure networks, their spatiality and materiality since the 19th century. He received his PhD in history from ETH Zurich. Before joining the GHI in January 2021, he was a postdoctoral fellow in the Max Weber Program at the European University Institute in Florence. His first monograph Human Porterage and Colonial State Formation in German East Africa, 1880s–1914: Tensions of Transport (2022) explores the shifting role of caravan transport and human porterage in colonial East Africa. His current research project examines the history of intercontinental airline networks before the "jet age."

Teku Reza Fadeli

Calibrated Motion and the Bicycle in Colonial Indonesia, 1890s–1930s

This paper examines the bicycle as a site where mobility and immobility were produced, regulated, and contested in colonial Indonesia between the late nineteenth century and the interwar decades. Introduced through colonial trade and elite leisure networks, the bicycle initially functioned as a costly emblem of refinement among Europeans and select indigenous aristocrats, indexing access to modernity and comportment aligned with colonial authority. Its wider circulation among indigenous clerks, schoolteachers, police auxiliaries, and students unsettled the symbolic order that linked public movement to rank and racial distinction. In response, the colonial administration codified traffic regulations, policed bodily technique, and developed fiscal mechanisms that rendered movement measurable and accountable. Police manuals in Batavia instructed patrols to maintain a fixed pace of ten kilometres per hour, to accelerate only under specific conditions, and to extinguish lamps during night duty. These prescriptions organised tempo, visibility, and presence in the street, defining when authority should announce itself and when it should recede. Malay-language guides such as *Awas!* (1927) extended similar expectations to civilian cyclists, emphasising straight trajectories, advance signalling, and anticipatory attention. One provision required deaf cyclists to attach identifying markers to their bicycles so that others would read their bodies and adjust their movements accordingly. Such measures classified riders through modes of visibility and organised the sensorium of everyday mobility. Drawing on print culture, regulations, visual archives, and tax directories, this paper traces how cycling became a field in which public comportment, distinction, and spatial belonging were negotiated. The study argues that colonial rule worked through the controlling of motion itself. By calibrating

speed, posture, and visibility, the bicycle helped organise social hierarchy at the level of bodily gesture and everyday movement.

Teuku Reza Fadeli is a historian and lecturer at the Department of History, Universitas Indonesia. He holds a PhD in History from the University of York. He is currently a Visiting Fellow at KITLV (Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies), Leiden where he is developing his project 'Wheels of Empire', which examines how the bicycle shaped social mobility, racial hierarchy, and everyday urban life in colonial and postcolonial Indonesia. The study traces how a global technology was adapted, classified, and endowed with new social meanings within shifting political contexts.

Harald Fischer-Tiné

'Liberating Technology' or Two-wheeled 'Tool of Empire'? The Social Lives of the Bicycle in Colonial India (*c*. 1870 -1920)

This paper explores the social lives of the bicycle under the Raj during the first half century after its introduction in the Indian subcontinent in 1868. In doing so, it brings together insights from the history of technology with approaches from cultural history and gender history. After a brief introduction, the paper first examines the discursive dimension of the bicycle and cycling in India. It demonstrates that the new mobility technology carried considerable symbolic weight in the first decades after its introduction to the subcontinent. Particularly between the 1870s and 1900, the two-wheeler was celebrated as an emblem of Western techno-modernity and, by extension, European superiority. Many Europeans in South Asia hence sought to restrict access to the bicycle by promoting a discourse that framed "oriental" bodies and minds as incompatible with Western technology. The second part concentrates on analysing the practical uses of the "steel horse" by the white colonial establishment in India. I show that the new mobility technology was widely instrumentalized as a "tool of empire" that enhanced the reach of administrators, soldiers, police, and missionaries. This increased "micro-moblity", in turn, helped stabilize imperial power by contributing to the 'vertical encompassment' and spatialization of the colonial state. The third part turns to South Asian engagements with the bicycle in the early twentieth century. It traces how different groups resisted, appropriated, and reworked the imported technology. The spectrum ranges from attacks on European cyclists, to the "vernacularisation" of cycling gear, to sportive exploits aimed at refuting colonial stereotypes of Indian men as weak or effeminate. Taken together, these examples reveal that the diffusion of the bicycle in colonial India was far from a straightforward instance of Western technological imposition. Rather, it constituted a dynamic, inter-actional process shaped by friction, contestation, and the continual renegotiation of power and embodiment within the colonial order.

Harald Fischer-Tiné is Professor of modern global history at ETH Zurich and currently senior fellow at the research centre gd:c, Munich. He holds a PhD in South Asian history from the University of Heidelberg (2000) and has published extensively on global history, South Asian colonial history, and the history of the British Empire. His latest publications include the monograph 'The YMCA in Late Colonial India: Modernization, Philanthropy and American Soft Power in South Asia', (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023) and the article "Man-making and World-making on Two Wheels: Indian 'Globe Cyclists' in the Interwar Years", Journal of Global History, 19 (3) 2024: 392-420 (with Souvik Naha).

Mihir Jha

Transport Systems, Recreational Pastoralism and Externalization of 'Nature' in Late Colonial Chhotanagpur (1900-1947)

The transfer of Bengal's revenue rights to the East India Company in 1765 prompted the arrival of colonial rule into the Chhotanagpur, a province considered different from 'Bengal proper' due to its forested plateau geography and tribal population. Represented often as an 'inaccessible' tract inhabited by 'wild' tribes in early-colonial discourse, the Chhotanagpur, with the strengthening of administration and upgradation of roads from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, witnessed a shift in its representation. As travelling writers, both British and Indian, recorded their impressions of the province, the aesthetic judgement for the Chhotanagpur's landscape changed gradually from 'wild' to 'picturesque'; the tribals were portrayed as 'simple' and 'innocent'; and administrative centres like Hazaribagh and Ranchi gained prominence as healthy 'garden' towns. With the turn of the century, the Chhotanagpur had begun to be experienced as a pastoral periphery to Calcutta. In this presentation, I will explain how transport systems in late-colonial Chhotanagpur combined with mining industry and the province's pastoralism to consolidate as well as complicate the imagination of the Chhotanagpur as a pastoral province. With close references to literary, administrative and commercial publications, I will argue that in the period under study, the railways served the logic of both industrialization and pastoralism, inducting, on the one hand, places as diverse as deep forests and small industrial settlements into the pastoral gaze, and diminishing, on the other, the erstwhile 'garden' topos in industrializing towns. Examining the concurrent expansion of roads and the emergence of motoring culture in the Chhotanagpur, I will demonstrate that as urban-industrial regions started to be divested of 'nature' near the end of colonial rule, the pastoral gaze came to rest upon the province's 'interiors,' reorganizing 'natural-looking' rural areas into a circuitous 'countryside' comprising 'beauty spots' and 'authentic' tribals. Dwelling on the transformation of the formerly 'wild' Chhotanagpur into a growing 'industrial' province, I will close the presentation with remarks on the changing meanings of 'nature' in the Chhotanagpur's colonial pastoralism.

Mihir Jha (Mihir Vatsa) is a writer and a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Delhi. A former Charles Wallace Writing Fellow at the University of Stirling (UK), he is the author of the travel memoir' Tales of Hazaribagh: An Intimate Exploration of Chhotanagpur Plateau' (Speaking Tiger, 2021), for which he was awarded the Yuva Puraskar from Sahitya Akademi, India's national academy of letters.

Abhimanyu Pandey

From 'Almost All that There Is' to a 'Remote Region': Interrogating the Evolution of Remoteness and Connectivity in Spiti, from the Colonial to the Postcolonial Periods

This paper interrogates remoteness and connectivity in the Spiti valley, an Indian Trans-Himalayan region that earlier formed the British empire's frontier with Tibet, and later on independent India's borderland with China. It does so through looking closely at the affordances (and the lack thereof) towards (im)mobility of the colonial and postcolonial overland routes – in and around Spiti – both for the broader state actors who sought to govern Spiti, and for the Pitiyas, the locals of Spiti. In the first part, the paper demonstrates that the British, who ruled Spiti from 1846 till India's Independence in 1947, were compelled to

exercise indirect rule and grant major relaxations to Spiti on account of (a) this region being geographically extremely inaccessible, (b) culturally very different from 'mainland' India, (c) a frontier with a docile 'tribal' population, and (d) a region with otherwise low economic or military value. But the British remained tense about their hold over Spiti throughout their rule, as visible in (a) their instituting of an Inner Line in Spiti; (b) their fears regarding Spiti being used as an escape route by Indian nationalist fugitives, and (c) the frictions that Western travellers often faced with Pitiyas while trying to avail 'begar' labour and supplies from them. The Pitiyas themselves did not regard Spiti as a 'remote' place in relation to British India, but rather as a mostly self-sufficient homeland that engaged in complex relations with regions bordering it in all directions, including Tibet. After Independence, this self-regard among the Pitiyas underwent a paradigm shift, especially following the postcolonial state's massive road-building and welfare projects in Spiti from the 1950s onwards, largely in response to the PRC's annexation of Tibet over 1950-51. In the present day, Spiti endures as a remote region for the postcolonial state, despite the 'distance-demolishing technologies' of roads, telecommunications, and air connectivity that now provide both the state and the locals there with an unprecedented degree of mobility. However, now ironically, the Pitiyas themselves commonly regard Spiti as a remote region. They deploy remoteness as a key political idea for getting their rightful due, or better provisioning from the state. At the same time, imposing remoteness through regulating access to Spiti along the highways leading there is also something that both the state and the locals have practiced, from time to time in the postcolonial period, as this paper illustrates through specific examples.

Abhimanyu Pandey is an Adjunct Professor at the Centre for Heritage Management, Ahmedabad University. His interests lie in socio-cultural dynamics, economic development, infrastructures, and histories of the Himalayas. He holds a DPhil in Anthropology (Heidelberg University) and an MPhil in Development Studies (University of Cambridge). He has been the recipient of several academic honours, including the DAAD doctoral grant and the Cambridge Commonwealth Shared Scholarship, among others. With Kevin Bubriski, he is the co-author of 'Kailash Yatra: a Long Walk to Mt Kailash through Humla' (Penguin, 2018). He served as Cultural Services Analyst at the inter-governmental organisation ICIMOD, Kathmandu, from 2014-17.

Oishi Dhar

Steam, Patriotism, and Subaltern Mobility: Indigenous Maritime Enterprise and the Politics of Technology in Colonial Bengal

This paper examines how steam technology in colonial Bengal (1830s-1940s) generated new and contested forms of subaltern mobility that blurred the boundaries between imperial control and indigenous agency. While steam navigation often has been interpreted as a symbol of British technological domination, this study reconstructs how Indian entrepreneurs and engineers—most notably Bipin Chandra Bhattacharya, Abdul Bari Chowdhury, and the early maritime ventures of Carr, Tagore & Co.—reimagined steam as a tool of *swadeshi* self-reliance and collective movement. Drawing on vernacular newspapers, technical manuals, and private company archives, the paper situates enterprises such as the Ghatal Steam Navigation Company (still in operation) and Bengal Burma Steam Navigation Company within a wider riverine and oceanic world where mobility became a language of anticolonial aspiration. By foregrounding the deltaic ecologies of Bengal, the paper explores how

environmental constraints, colonial legal regulation, and indigenous craft traditions shaped maritime entrepreneurship. Figures like Motilal Seal, often omitted from canonical industrial histories, exemplify subaltern participation in what might be called the "vernacularization" of maritime modernity. Studying networks of Indian engineers, laborers, and financiers demonstrates that colonial mobility was neither unidirectional nor uniformly imposed: it was reconfigured through friction, adaptation, and localized expertise. Conceptually, the paper engages with the workshop's theme of (im-)mobility by framing the steamship as a creolized artifact—a site where the circulation of technology, people, and ideas collided with imperial attempts to immobilize colonial subjects. Through this lens, mobility in colonial Bengal appears not simply as movement through space, but as a political act of reclamation, transforming the machinery of empire into a vessel of indigenous imagination and technological citizenship.

Oishi Dhar is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Her research examines the intersections of technology, mobility, and empire in colonial South Asia, with a focus on steam navigation, indigenous entrepreneurship, and environmental histories of Bengal. Drawing on vernacular, archival, and material sources, her work explores how maritime infrastructures shaped both colonial governance and subaltern mobility. She is broadly interested in global histories of technology, decolonial thought, and the transoceanic circulation of industrial modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Shivangi Jaiswal

'Skilling' for the Empire: Wartime 'Mobility' of Indian Workers in the 1940s

One of the principal registers through which the British colonial state sought to mobilise and rally Indian workers during the Second World War was 'skilling'. The imperative for the colonial state was to rapidly expand technically trained labour to sustain wartime production. To meet the shortage of 'skilled' labour force and intensify Indian industrial production for the War, groups of carefully selected young Indian working-class men were sent to Britain for 'advanced' technical training. British Labour Minister Ernest Bevin took particular interest in bringing young Indian men from marginalised communities (particularly Dalits and Muslims) for industrial training in Britain. The 'mobility' of Indian workers for training was thereby projected not only in 'geographical' but also in 'social' terms. Furthermore, the training of Indian workers in Britain also served as a propaganda of India's support for Britain's war efforts at a time when the opposition to India's involvement in the War was gaining momentum in India. At this conjuncture, imperial imperatives, working-class aspirations and social hierarchies converged around the question of 'skilling' of Indian workers. Based on a historical investigation of official correspondence at different levels and the colonial state's overseas technical training schemes and their reports, the paper shall trace how this 'mobility' of Indian workers was organised, justified and regulated to make them 'skilled'. It will further analyse how questions of identity based on caste and religion structured access to these training opportunities, which in principle were open to 'all' working-class men. Following the end of the War in 1945, contracts for wartime goods terminated; wartime skills became irrelevant. The paper shall examine the post-war 'crisis' that unfolded when the pathways to this 'mobility' abruptly closed, trained Indian workers returned to India, and the needs of large-scale industries for nation-building became a priority to the newly independent Indian state.

Shivangi Jaiswal is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Contemporary History at the Department of Humanities, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy. As a member of the ERC project– 'WO–NAM' led by Chiara Bonfiglioli, she currently works on Indian women's non-aligned internationalism during the Cold War. She holds a PhD in History from Jawaharlal Nehru University, India; her thesis investigates the intersection of questions of caste and labour during the Second World War and the post-war years in India. She has previously worked as a Research Associate on projects on the social and economic history of India.

David Arnold

Mobility: Its Modes, Technologies and Constraints

Given the broad remit inherent in the term 'mobility', and still more 'immobility', this paper begins by proposing some basic modalities of mobility and immobility both within and between the colonial regimes of South and Southeast Asia—the techno-mobility of people and commodities made possible by certain technologies and accompanying knowledge systems; the eco-mobility resulting from environmental pull/push factors; the ideological mobility associated with imperial knowledge systems, their trans-imperial as well as local agencies and exchanges; and the mobilities or immobilities created or asserted through the practices or effects of colonial governance. The discussion also touches on (but does not attempt to explore further) the possibility of sensory mobilities. Are all of these in some way linked to capitalism or are they to a large degree autonomous? Do they have a particular relevance to the regions of South and Southeast Asia and to their constituent territories? Does an enhanced understanding of mobility under colonialism support or refute the idea of a 'connected' history? The paper uses several historical examples to explore these possible modalities, the overlaps between them, and the likely constraints. Examples include forms of transport as a technological but also ideological expression of certain forms of physical mobility, including bicycles and automobiles. It then considers the question of animal mobility across the regions, especially in relation to cattle, its association with (or disconnect from) human migration, and the environmental constraints and opportunities linked to animal movement; and, finally, the paper considers 'tropical' disease, health and medicine as factors associated with both mobility and specific forms of immobility. Is there then a recognizable 'mobilities turn' in South and Southeast Asian historical scholarship or is mobility in one form or another so pervasive and omnipresent as to render the concept unhelpful?

David Arnold is Professor emeritus for South Asian and Global History at the University of Warwick, UK. He was a member of the Subaltern history collective and has more than a dozen monographs and countless articles, edited volumes, and book chapters on a wide range of topics to his credit. Most relevant for the theme of this workshop are his 2013 book on 'Everyday Technology: Machines and the Making of India's Modernity' (Chicago University Press) and his article ''Subaltern Streets: India, 1870–1947'; in Jazeel Tariq and Legg Stephen, (eds), 'Subaltern Geographies', Athens, GA, 2019, pp. 36–57.

Michaela Dimmers

Mobility and Immobility in British Indian Prisons

Studies on convict mobilities in the 19th and 20th centuries have focussed so far on convict

transportation mainly to the Andamans, Mauritius and South-East Asia. This paper proposes an analysis of mobility and immobility for convicts, staff members and visitors in prisons of mainland British India. It will show how convicts were forcibly highly mobile and immobile. They were transferred from one prison to another due to labour shortages or for reasons of jail discipline. Transportation to the Andaman Islands included stays in prisons on the way to Calcutta, the place of departure of the deportation. Convicts were also voluntary mobile or intended to be, when they escaped or attempted to escape. Convicts left the prisons regularly for extramural labour projects, building roads and bridges, but also working in factories. But convicts were highly immobile as well, but some were able to carve out spaces of mobility within the confined environments of the prisons. Convict officers who were part of a privileged group of convicts and largely responsible for the jail discipline, for example, could move rather freely within the prisons. Important is also the mobility prescribed on release. Convicts living far away from the prisons they were detained in, were supposed to receive travel aid for reaching their home districts. Jail manuals, containing rules and regulations supposed to ensure the vision, the colonial regime had for its prisons, dictated these modes of mobility and immobility. Prison staff were surprisingly immobile. The jail manuals contained strict rules for them as well for example when they were transferred to other prisons, either because of labour shortages or because they had personal connections to prisoners, especially the lower ranking staff members had little sway over their transfers. Importantly, their housing was often on the prison grounds. The rules during prison transfers pertaining to staff members from the free(er) population, for example, were just as strict as they were for convicts. This paper will also engage with high level mobility into the prisons as either jail committee members, people from abroad, volunteers, lectures or trainers from various institutions were granted access. The ambivalence of this mobility – immobility spectrum – brings not only different aspects of the inner workings of colonial prisons to light, but shows often unexpected freedoms and unfreedoms within these coerced worlds.

Michaela Dimmers is an affiliated fellow at the Max Weber Forum for South Asian Studies in Delhi. She defended her PhD "The Penal Experience – Incarceration in Colonia Inda" in 2025. Her new research project studies modes of intermediation, negotiation, and obligation in three different contexts of coercive labour, namely enslaved, indentured and convict labour in the Indian Ocean within British, French and Portuguese colonial regimes.

Vaibhav Bhardwaj

Negotiating Borders, Performing Sovereignty: Extradition and the Mobility of 'Criminals' in Early Postcolonial South Asia

The transition from empire to nation-state in South Asia was not a clean break but a prolonged negotiation over law, territory, and belonging. This paper argues that the management of cross-border "criminal" mobility in the early years after Partition provides a revealing lens on how the 'international' was being constituted in postcolonial South Asia. Focusing on a protracted dispute (1952–56) between India and Pakistan over the extradition of Bhoopat Singh, a dacoit from the Saurashtra region, the paper traces how the movement of so-called bandits across the new border exposed the fragility of postcolonial sovereignty. Drawing on Anton Blok's work on the relationship between bandits and landlords in Sicily, this paper situates these South Asian bandits within wider networks of power and patronage, exploring the resilience or fragility of these networks in postcolonial contexts. Through the Bhoopat case, the paper examines the reconstitution of a language of sovereignty through the

application of extradition law, showing how the new nations of India and Pakistan defined their borders through both cooperation and contestation. Using police and Home Ministry correspondence, press reportage, and parliamentary debates, the paper shows how extradition negotiations became arenas where legality, nationalism, and public sentiment collided. These archives also offer insight into the multiple variables that shaped the negotiations and outcomes of extradition cases ranging from public pressure, maintaining legal ambiguity over border, concerns about minority protection, and shifting diplomatic postures etc. revealing that extradition was as much about performing sovereignty as enforcing law. Building on Priyasha Saksena's formulation of divisible sovereignty and Pallavi Raghavan's notion of pragmatic diplomacy, this paper interprets extradition disputes as moments in which India and Pakistan simultaneously performed sovereignty, negotiated borders, recognized shared security interests, and articulated competing visions of legality and citizenship. Situated within the analytical frame of " New" International Relations, the analysis recovers an alternative genealogy of the international emerging not from high diplomacy alone but from everyday negotiations over movement, and fugitivity.

Vaibhav Bhardwaj holds a B.A. (Hons.) in History from Hindu College, University of Delhi, and an M.A. in History from the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in the Department of History and Archaeology at Shiv Nadar University. His doctoral research examines elections, representation, sovereignty, and citizenship in colonial and postcolonial South Asia. He is developing this paper as part of his Ph.D. seminar work with Professor Radhika Singha, focusing on extradition and cross-border mobility between India and Pakistan as a site where law and sovereignty were performed and contested in the early postcolonial period.

Gregory Goulding

Domesticating Mobility: Integration through Travel in Rahul Sankrityayan's late-career Himalayan Travelogues

Rahul Sankrityayan (1893–1963) is Hindi literature's most well-known travel writer, whose 1930s journeys to Tibet and the Soviet Union presented him as a free-spirited wanderer whose movement—in challenging imperial restrictions and tracing a range of inter-Asian connections—was viewed as a project of national formation (Chudal 2016). Sankrityayan's later writing, however, demonstrates the transformation of a rebellious mobility into travel mediated, through the new spatial projects of independent India, by motor-road infrastructure, dak bungalows, and administrative support. It also demonstrates how regions that are symbolic of transnational Indian connections are imbricated with the disciplining of space and the integration of borderland regions. This paper, pairing close reading with attention to Himalayan borderland mobilities, examines Sankrityayan's writing on Kinnaur. A small region along the Sutlej River northeast of Shimla, Kinnaur remained relatively isolated even after the construction of the Hindustan–Tibet road in the nineteenth century (Alam 2008, Gardner 2014). It has been viewed by Hindi writers as a borderland and trade route, in contrast to regions, such as Garhwal or the Kullu valley, that were depicted as sites of Hindu indigeneity and renunciation (Pozza 2015). Sankrityayan visited Kinnaur several times, and it became the subject of his 1948 travelogue, *Kinnar deś meṃ* [In Kinnaur Country]. But this work forms a sharp contrast with the adventurer of the 1930s; set in a newly independent India, it shows its author using the techniques of travel-writing to incorporate a seemingly exotic region into national space. In Sankrityayan's account, the technologies and tropes of

foreign travel—logistical anecdote and itinerary enumeration, a non-local perspective, exoticizing frames—are domesticated, looking forward to a new discourse of tourism. By showing the transformation of the international wanderer into the domestic traveler, *Kinnar deś meṃ* thus reckons with the question of imperial and post-imperial mobilities.

Gregory Goulding is Associate Professor of South Asia Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Working with Hindi and connected literary traditions, his work follows negotiations of literary form, transnational and international imaginations, and multilingual literary histories. Current projects address Hindi modernism, connections between historical fiction and travel writing, and ideas of space and regionality in Central India. Articles have been published in journals including Comparative Literature, Modern Asian Studies, and The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society. His first book, 'Cold War Genres: Local and International in Hindi Literature', was published in 2024 with SUNY University Press.

Siddharth Pandey

Ways of Wayfaring: 'Malling' and the Transformation of Simla to Shimla

My paper navigates Shimla's celebrated 'walking culture' from the colonial to the postcolonial period in order to critically reflect on the politics of movement, leisure and identity formation in the north Indian British-Himalayan town. Shimla, earlier Simla, was established in the middle of the 19th century as the Summer Capital of the Raj, where the imperial government would shift to for more than half a year from Calcutta (and later, Delhi). The most famous of all hill stations that sprung across the length and breadth of the subcontinent as 'homes away from home', Shimla quickly evolved into the 'Chhota Vilayat' or 'Little England' of colonial India, with a distinctive architectural and social self-fashioning becoming its hallmark. Central to such self-fashioning was the act of leisurely movement along the Mall Road, the key artery dominating Shimla's ridge that hosted the might of imperial infrastructure, from churches to clubs and theatres to government offices. My paper offers a textured reading of this and parallel spaces by looking into the human-human and human-non-human relationships over the two centuries. I argue that it was around the embodied, racialized and leisurely politics of walking that Shimla developed its unique character as a colonial hill town. If in the earlier era, wayfaring and viewing got intermeshed and institutionalized through a novel (European) vocabulary of pleasure and perception, then the post-1947 era took such intermeshing and institutionalization several steps ahead, albeit in different ways. The spontaneous generation of the neologism 'Malling' sometime during the late 20th century by the common Shimla citizens, is a testimony to the transformation of walking on the Mall from an 'elitist' activity to a 'democratized' one. The shift, however, was hardly linear, and it is by exploring the numerous, expansive expressions of wayfaring that I intend to make sense of the town's affective identity.

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International Centre Goa (ICG), and his publications can be found across South Asian media and international academic forums. His first book, 'Fossil', was a finalist for the 2022 Banff Mountain Literature Awards (Canada), and he is currently working on a narrative history of Shimla, under contract with Hachette India.

Naina Manjrekar

Partitioning Ports and Seas: From 'Indian Seamen' to 'Undesirable Aliens'

The study of mobilities in the wake of South Asian decolonisation has produced a rich body of scholarship on the movement of Partition refugees, and the making of the line between refugee, evacuee and citizen. This paper looks at this moment from the perspective of the highly peripatetic subaltern group of South Asian seamen, to ask what happened to their mobility when new, post-Partition national borders posed a disruption to their long-standing patterns of seafaring mobility. In examining the transition from empire to the early postcolonial period in the Indian subcontinent, it focuses particularly on the transport technologies of steamships and their networks of circulation and recruitment between ports in British India. Until 1947, 'British Indian' seamen were recruited (predominantly by British shipping companies) on Indian 'lascar' contracts. The majority of these seamen came from regions in Punjab and Bengal to work in the ports of Calcutta and Bombay. After 1947, however, the recruitment areas became partitioned from the ports of employment by new national borders: while the recruitment areas became parts of West and East Pakistan, the large ports of employment remained in India. Apart from Partition, the paper also enquires into other forms of (im)mobility imposed by newly-formed nation-states. For instance, the circuits of mobility of Goan seamen were also rendered precarious by the blockade by India of Goa, a Portuguese colony until its integration in 1961. It enquires, then, into the legal recasting of a section of British Indian 'lascar seamen' as 'undesirable aliens' in independent India. Despite these very real challenges to mobility posed by nation-state borders and the division between 'citizens' and 'aliens', it shows that mobility was recast but not wholly stymied for over a decade after the drawing of new national borders, and the marking of 'citizens' and 'aliens'.

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Arnab Dutta

The Greater India Society and Anticolonial (Im)Mobilities in Interwar Asia

Drawing from the individual legal cases with stifling passport-regimes faced by three peripatetic and antiliberal Bengali anticolonial activists and intellectuals – Benoy Kumar Sarkar (1887 – 1949), Kalidas Nag (1892 – 1966) and Radhakamal Mukerjee (1889 – 1968),

and zooming out to their eventual conceptualisations of the spatial limits and expanses of the imperial infrastructures of circulation and restriction of interwar (im)mobility, this paper explores how the Greater India Society, an anticolonial internationalist yet Indian expansionist organisation these aforementioned individuals belonged to, underscored the co-constitution of the binaries of liberal imperial mobility regimes across the boundaries of British, French and Dutch Empires in South and South-East Asia and the exclusionary measures imposed to limit non-White/non-European mobility. Founded by Kalidas Nag and spearheaded by a highly globally-mobile group of Bengali anticolonial nationalist academics, the Calcutta-based *Greater India Society* (active from 1926 to the 1950s) positioned itself between its core activities of disseminating philological- archaeological research on the one hand and setting the legal arguments based on the League of Nations Minority Treaties and eventually proposing the template of a separate 'Oriental League of Nations / the Asian Monroe Doctrine' to redefine the spatial limits of international legal norms of intra-Asian mobility-regimes fit for (upcoming decolonised) Asia. To that end, engaging with the emerging scientific discipline of demography, these arguments from the Greater India Society eventually culminated in Radhakamal Mukerjee's *Migrant Asia* (1936), an extended manifesto vouching for overcoming the immobility under the so-called 'Asian Exclusion Act' across what Mukerjee called an 'Asiatic Lebensraum.' Contextualising this episode of an often-overlooked segment of a highly antiliberal and pro-Fascist anticolonial conceptualisation of intra-Asian (im)mobility in the interwar years and involving a wider set of empirically-grounded archival reflections at the intersections of legal history, conceptual history and the history of migration, this paper complicates a narrowly-defined history of emancipatory anticolonialism and eventually contributes to the entangled-yet-dis:connected histories of imperial mobility regimes in South and South-East Asia.

Arnab Dutta is an early-career lecturer of European Politics and Society at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. He has been, until recently, a PhD candidate of Global Intellectual History at the University of Groningen. He was also a visiting doctoral fellow at the Department of History of Ideas, Uppsala University, Sweden; European University Institute Florence, Italy; and Global Intellectual History Graduate School, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany. Drawing on a wide range of sources and concepts derived from the language-worlds of Bangla, Hindi, Sanskrit, English, German, French, Italian and Japanese, his doctoral dissertation project explored the intellectual entanglements between Interwar Germany and British India. Among others, he has been awarded with the Duke of Arenberg Award 2018; the International Weimar Award 2020 from the Klassik Stiftung Weimar, Germany; and the Vossius fellowship in the history of humanities and sciences, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. His most recent publication is "The Allure of Great Space: The Greater India Society and the Trope of Anti-Liberal Internationalism in British Bengal, 1920s-40s" (in Antiliberal Internationalism in the Twentieth Century, Routledge, 2025).