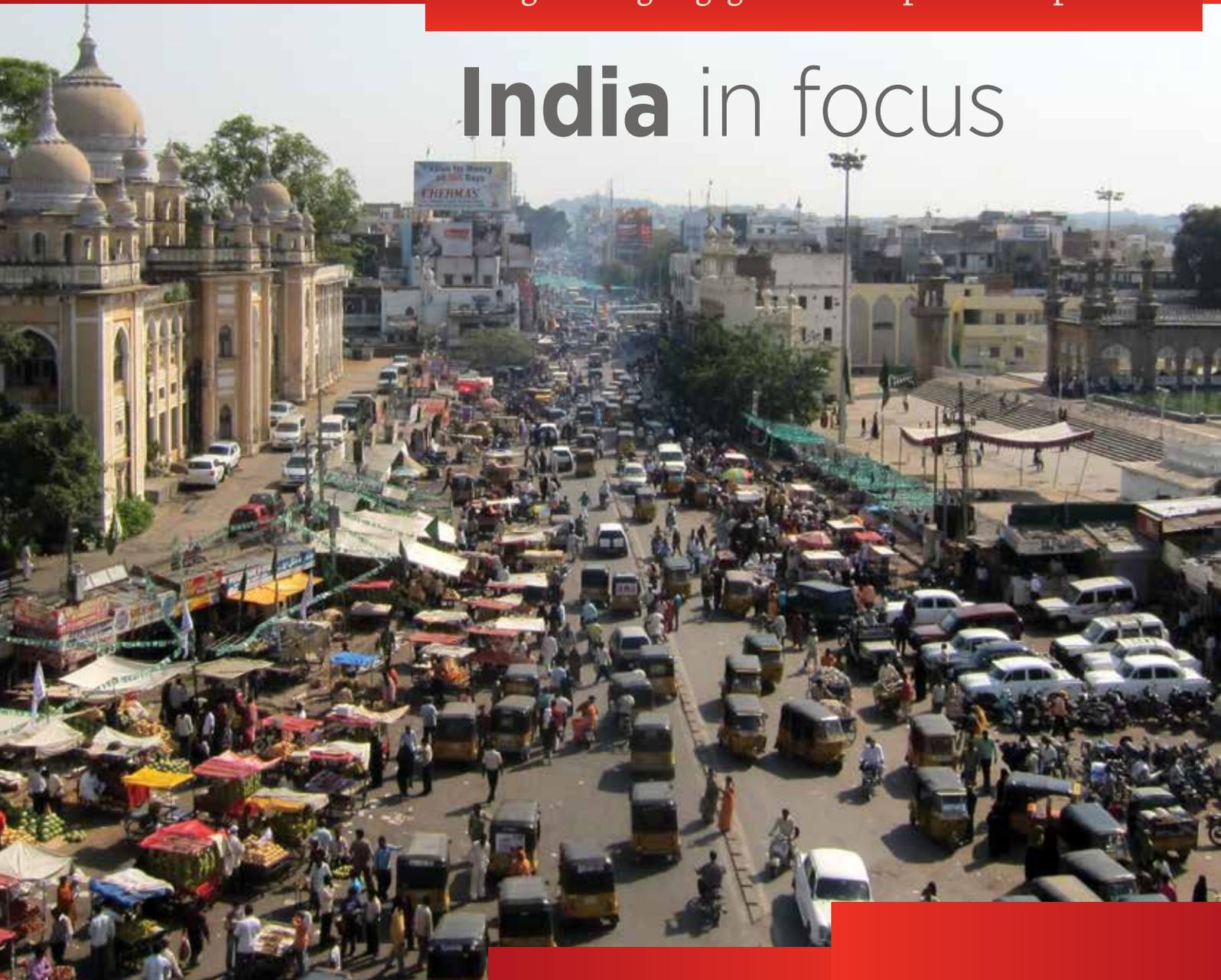


ASIA RISING

Strengthening engagement and partnerships in Asia

India in focus



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CREDITS

Cover photo:
Indi Samarajiva

Other photos:
Patrik M. Loeff
Venkat Balaji
Tess Flynn
Juergen Schoepf
I. Sonder
Miroslav Čuljat
U.S. Air Force Staff Sgt. Jette Carr
Gabriel Knight
Matt Smith

Text:
Matt Smith
Ian Woolford

Design
Basil Pardo

With thanks to:
Nick Bisley and Diana Heatherich

A MESSAGE FROM THE VICE-CHANCELLOR



Welcome to the fifth issue of *Asia Rising*. This edition focusses on India and highlights some of the diverse Asia-related research being done at La Trobe University.

La Trobe University's commitment to India dates back to the University's establishment in 1967, when acquisitions for the Bordchardt Library on our main campus gave it the best collection on India in Australia at the time. Its holdings of government publications and periodicals continue to draw admiring remarks even amongst scholars from India.

India has always held a special place in the hearts and minds of the La Trobe University community. We are one of only two Australian universities that teaches Hindi, and we are proud that Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi visited

La Trobe during her Australian tour in 1968 (she remains the only Indian Prime Minister to visit an Australian university). We also have some very special relationships with institutions in India, including our partnership with Lady Shri Ram College, which has been going for more than 20 years and is one of the longest-running student exchange programs at the University.

La Trobe was one of the founding members of the Australia India Institute, along with the University of Melbourne and the University of New South Wales, and is continuing to build a strong program of partnerships and research activity through the Institute.

In the pages that follow, you will find articles on some of La Trobe University's activity that is taking place in India or in collaboration with Indian institutions.

We look forward to working closely with colleagues in India in the coming years to develop deeper partnerships and continue our program of activities with both students and researchers.

Professor John Dewar

Listen to the podcast

Asia Rising is also the name of the podcast from La Trobe Asia, with news, views and general happenings in Asia's states and societies. Subscribe now on iTunes or SoundCloud to hear interviews with La Trobe University academics and guests on a wide range of Asian countries and topics.



Dr Ian Woolford (Hindi lecturer, La Trobe University) is interviewed by Professor Nick Bisley (Executive Director, La Trobe Asia) on Indian sedition issues.

DIABETES IN TRIBES OF INDIA

The spread of a western lifestyle of highly processed, sugary foods and a decrease in exercise carries a great risk for developing disease, particularly heart disease, hypertension, obesity and type-2 diabetes. India is home to more than 62 million diabetics, second to only China, and like many countries that number is growing.

“Indians are particularly susceptible to diabetes,” says Dr Jency Thomas. “Diabetes has strong family related risk factors, and genetic disposition to it can be found throughout the Indian subcontinent.”

Dr Thomas is a lecturer in La Trobe University’s Department of Physiology, Anatomy and

Microbiology, and a fellow at the Australian India Institute. Her PhD focused on the link between diabetes and memory loss.

“The effects of diabetes on the kidneys, heart, and obesity are known, but the impact on mental health and memory is less well established,” she says. “It is a critical emerging area.”

Dr Thomas’ research took her to the Nilgiris hills, a mountain range in the western-most part of the state of Tamil Nadu in India. Working with her colleagues Dr Colleen Thomas and Dr Markandeya Jois, she undertook a qualitative study amongst six local tribal populations, looking at diet, lifestyle and general health.

“Most of the tribes we surveyed have lived in isolation with little contact with urban populations until the last decade,” says Dr Thomas. “They have simple lifestyles with very low rates of diabetes and other illnesses.”

“In urban populations the prevalence of diabetes is 4.7%, whereas in tribal populations it is less than half of this. We wanted to examine why there was this difference.”

For the most part the tribes lived simple lives and largely maintained an independent lifestyle with their own languages, culture and food. Food was organically farmed, consisting of rice, millet, fruit and vegetables, and buffalo milk. There



was plenty of physical activity, with up to 20km of walking a day.

“The increased contact with urban populations have led to food and lifestyle changes for these tribes, and that has had a big impact on their health,” says Dr Thomas. “Many of them have changed their diet to white rice provided by the Indian government, and processed supplies from the local shop. Public transport is also more accessible, which leads to decrease in walking and exercise activity.”

Another problem tribes are facing is the number of youth moving to urban areas. Their diets change as they eat hamburgers, pizzas, and other processed foods, and they exercise less.

“If they return to their tribes they find their health has changed dramatically,” says Dr Thomas. “At one time the biggest health complaints were infectious diseases, fevers, and headaches. With a changing diet the tribes are now seeing instances of malnutrition, hypertension, diabetes and heart attack. It’s still well below the national average, but rising.”

In addition to interviewing tribal elders and observing village practices, Dr Thomas will work with PhD student Narayanankutty Nair to fit physical activity monitors to tribal members living in both rural and urban areas. This will allow direct comparisons within a tribe as to the extent of the difference between the two lifestyles.

Dr Thomas’ study has been presented at medical schools in India, and she has made recommendations which could improve the situation for tribal members. Increased education regarding the health benefits of good nutrition, government initiatives like free school meals, and even changes to the administration of the public grocery distribution system could all make a difference in health.

“There’s a lot of good intentions in the work the government has done to provide assistance to tribes in India, but I believe the methodology needs to be reevaluated,” says Dr Thomas. “Initiatives such as providing medical support or implementing a weekly local market will not only encourage the economy of the tribes, but help with their diet as well.”

She also encourages the local tribes to retain their traditional culture and food habits as much as possible, and increase efforts to pass on traditional wisdom to the next generation.

“Traditional knowledge is the greatest weapon these tribes have in fighting the rise of lifestyle diseases like diabetes,” says Dr Thomas. “The western world could learn and benefit a lot from their simple diet habits and the way they live.”



Ooty women picking tea by hand.



LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA



Dr Stephen Morey filming Mr Lukam Cholim singing a traditional song while rowing a boat

A New Note

Dr Juergen Schoepf has recently worked on the Wa kápung dyo an instrument unique to the Tangsa region which operates through a method of thermoacoustics.

“A handful of bamboo shavings are packed into a completely hollow bamboo tube and are ignited, producing a loud, sinusoidal sound,” says Dr Schoepf. “It’s a method rarely used, the best-known example being a 19th century French instrument called a ‘pyrophone’.”

The Tangsa traditionally used the Wa kápung dyo to signal danger, and warn their village if an enemy was approaching. They were a simple sound tool which could be made within a few minutes, and the long tube, yielding a low pitch, would allow the sound to carry over several kilometres.

“Instruments of this type are rare, but I believe there is sufficient distinction and evidence for them to be officially classified on their own in the Hornbostel-Sachs system,” says Dr Schoepf. ●



Dr Juergen Schoepf
POST-DOCTORAL FELLOW, CENTRE FOR
RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE DIVERSITY

Talking Tangsa

The far eastern states are a remote region of India, close to southern China and Myanmar and geographically isolated from the rest of India by neighbouring Bangladesh. Dr Stephen Morey, a linguist in La Trobe University’s Centre for Research on Linguistic Diversity, has been studying tribal languages in the area for more than 20 years.

In 2007 he started work on the Tangsa languages, spoken by a diverse community of “tribes” residing on both sides of the Indo-Myanmar border.

“There is extensive language diversity amongst the Tangsa, with up to 75 varieties at the last count if we include the varieties in Myanmar, and it remains a huge task learning enough about each variety to really understand what’s going on,” says Dr Morey. “These remote areas of India are developing at an increasing pace and it puts a lot of pressure on the small autochthonous communities, their cultures and languages.”

In 2016 Dr Morey began a new project to document and analyse the Tangsa Wihu song-cycle, a ritual and poetic tradition performed over many hours and days. Working in collaboration with musicologist Dr Juergen Schoepf, the project will give insight into the Tangsa culture by focusing on the language, music and ritual of the Wihu song.

“The Wihu festival is known to a number of Tangsa tribes, but not to all,” says Dr Morey. “It is tied to the agricultural cycle and is celebrated in early January, before the agricultural activity resumes.”

The project is funded by a three year grant through the Australian Research Council Discovery Program, with additional funding from La Trobe University. ●



Dr Mary Keeffe with students and teachers from Bombay Teachers’ Training College

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN INDIA’S EDUCATION

In the 1990s India amended its constitution, making education for all children free and compulsory. In the years since this has unquestionably changed the country, but providing education to more than 300 million students can be a challenge.

“The education system in India faces many problems,” says Dr Mary Keeffe, Associate Professor in Inclusive Education at La Trobe University. “Funding regimes are not reliable, resources are limited, and the student body can be diverse with needs and abilities. This encourages Indian teachers to be resourceful in how they teach, and there’s much that Australian educators can learn from such a system.”

Dr Keeffe co-ordinates a program which sends twenty education students from La Trobe University to India. There they visit and work in Mumbai slum schools and rural disadvantaged schools, learning how education works in the different conditions.

“The Indian education system presents our students with a different experience,” says

Dr Keeffe. “Being in a challenging environment help our students think and teach in an innovative and sustainable way. This kind of social entrepreneurship may not be familiar to educators, but it is becoming more relevant.”

This has become a focus of research for Dr Keeffe and Dr Silvia McCormack, and another outcome of the three year program is the development of a survey to identify the attributes of social entrepreneurship in education.

“It’s important for educators to take a fresh look at problems in the classroom and relate good ideas to outcomes and inclusion,” says Dr Keeffe. “Exposing our students to teaching processes in India shows them they can achieve innovative ideas that are sustainable without the sole emphasis on a funding model.”

Education students are also able to gain an appreciation for the educational diversity within a country, particularly in rural areas where communities show a high level of engagement with the schools. After learning how these schools operate they teach at an international school in Delhi, where they experience students from diverse backgrounds.

“One surprising development during this program is our student’s desire to teach Indian students about the effects of pollution and sustainable living,” says Dr Keeffe. “They see this as a serious problem in modern India, and our students are motivated to try and apply inclusion and sustainability within a rigid curriculum structure.” ●

HINDI AND THE WORLD

In September 2016, India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj addressed the UN General Assembly in Hindi. She spoke about the recent terror attacks in Kashmir, and sought support in combating this violence. On Twitter, historian Ramchandra Guha suggested it was a "strategic mistake" for Swaraj to avoid English. "For India's case to reach the world," he said, "it must be made in a world language."

Hindi may well be the world's second or third most spoken language. So why isn't it automatically considered a world language? What do we mean by "the world"? For one answer, let's turn to veteran Hindi poet Kedarnath Singh's 2014 collection *Srishti par pahara*.

Hindi mera desh hai, Bhojpuri mera ghar. "Hindi is the world; Bhojpuri, my home." These are the opening lines of Kedarnath ji's poem "World and home." *Desh* means "country." But here it refers to the world: the entire environment outside the home. Home is the mother tongue: the local, sweet, regional language Bhojpuri. Hindi is everything else. It

is the world. "When I exit home, I enter the world. When I take a break from the world, I return home." The poet loves them both—the home and the world—and in this poem, he reflects on a lifetime traveling back and forth between them.

Let us take from Kedarnath ji's poem a definition of the world as something we dip in and out of. It is everything other than home, but through our travels back and forth, we leave pieces of home within it.

This definition helps explain the literary uproar caused by the 2016 Bharat Bhushan Agrawal award, conferred upon the young Hindi poet Shubham Shree for her delightful piece *Poetry Management*. The poem describes a fantastic world in which poetry degrees are treated like MBAs—in which poet's statements can rock the stock markets; in which the finance minister must calm investors whenever a leftist poet critique capitalism; in which the tension between India and Pakistan concerns duelling claims to pre-partition poets; and in which school children write essays on how they want to grow up to be the nation's CPO (the chief poetry officer). The opening lines declare poetry bogus—using the English word. Many of Shubham Shree's detractors understood this literally, and took offence, and went on to describe her imagined world as fundamentally unpoetic.

Shubham Shree certainly defies Hindi poetic conventions. In her discussion of *Poetry Management*, Hindi scholar Daisy Rockwell found



many of the poem's detractors were comfortable once it was translated into English. The problem, Rockwell suggests, is not with the poem's content, but that the content is conveyed in Hindi.

Guha criticised the External Affairs Minister for speaking to the world in Hindi. With poetry too, we find discomfort when Hindi speaks to the world. But we must not mistake this discomfort for evidence that Hindi cannot speak to the world.

Shubham Shree imagines India and Pakistan fighting not over Kashmir, but over their shared poets. Had she written a musical version, she might have gestured toward the sentiment in the 2014 song "Mere Samne Wali Sarhad pe" by the group Aisi Taisi Democracy. The group is composed of writer and lyricist Varun Grover, comedian Sanjay Raoura, and musician Rahul

Ram. Their live show includes standup comedy, original songs, and social commentary, and it is popular among university student crowd. "Mere Samne Wali Sarhad pe" is a satirical love song to the India-Pakistan relationship. The music video went viral on social media, and was greeted by a video response from a Pakistani army officer. This is an illustration of the daily creativity in Hindi and related languages—and this is creativity with consequence. It illustrates the reality of Hindi, or rather Hind-Urdu, as a lingua-franca across the South Asia region. It is a language of diplomacy, in this case conducted on the person-to-person level by musicians, comedians, and soldiers.

From the opening lines, one would be forgiven for thinking the song would focus on the shared humanity of India and Pakistan's

populations: "They say that an enemy/lives across the border/But when I look at them closely/I see they looks just like me" But the song elaborates instead on shared problems of corruption, religious fundamentalism, and, as expressed in the final lines of the song, entrenched political power: "Both ruled by the same two families/Over there Bhuttos, here Gandhis"

The video for both "Mere saamne wali sarhad pe" and the Pakistani response feature the artists' holding their written lyrics. While the Indian lyrics are written in Devanagiri script, the Pakistani version is written in Urdu script. On the colloquial level the two languages are indistinguishable. When Hindi is allowed to dip into English, as is it does in *Poetry Management*; when parts of the home are left in the world; when language borders are

policed less—possibilities for communication expand. Some might call this musical exchange soft diplomacy. But there is nothing soft about satire. This is biting, and this is hard. When soldiers, singers, and comedians trade affection across one of the world's most heavily militarised borders, we should listen to their conversation—if, for no other reason, because this is skilled artistry, and it is enjoyable.

Did Sushma Swaraj make a strategic mistake by failing to address the UN General Assembly in English? Is it possible to make a case to the world in Hindi? The examples presented here give a snapshot of recent intellectual activity taking place in Hindi. Simply put, these artists, singers, and poets are already making their case to the world—no English required. ●



Dr Ian Woolford
LECTURER, HINDI PROGRAM



United States Defense Secretary James Mattis meets with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Washington, June 26, 2017

INDIA AND THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD

India's Independence Day took on a special significance in 2017, marking seventy years since the establishment of the country as an independent nation following collapse of British India.

Its status as a postcolonial country has influenced how it interacts with English speaking countries, giving it the perception of a trusted ally, a valuable trade partner, and a 'democratic counterweight' to China.

"Rightly or wrongly, there are expectations on its relationship with English-speaking countries, largely inferred by a shared history," says Dr Alexander Davis, a New Generation Network postdoctoral fellow with La Trobe University and the Australia India Institute. He has been researching India's identity and history in a postcolonial context.

"The postcolonial British empire can be problematic to define," says Davis. "It can be structured by a common language, ideals, government and religion. It tends to lead to inclusions and exclusions, and I'm interested in how it shapes foreign policy."

The United Kingdom the United States, Canada and Australia have close relationships with one another, which they define as being based on shared experiences and values.

"Historically, these experiences depended on the benefits of Imperialism for the UK and its settler-colonies, many of which came at the expense of India and Indians," says Dr Davis. "English speaking countries reach out to India and try to emphasise the positives of its colonial experience. They see India as a like-minded sympathetic country and try and try to co-opt it into this space."

Australia

India played an important part in Australia's founding, as it was the source of most of the supplies sent to the newly established British colony. Since then the two countries fought on the same side of many colonial era conflicts.

"Australia tries to emphasise the positive links of its colonial experience with India in an effort to form beneficial ties, but often wilfully ignores the difficulties presented to Indian migrants by the White Australian Policy," says Davis. "Indian migration to Australia was heavily restricted for decades, so politicians pushing a shared link won't find it a particularly effective strategy,"

United Kingdom

The years following the collapse of British India has seen a cooling of a once close relationship, and while there are strong people-to-people business links, partnerships and tourism, attitudes have changed and Britain is seen as much more insular.

"The United Kingdom voting for Brexit in 2016 and deciding to leave the European Union is the culmination of an attitude change that has become prevalent in the country," says Davis. "When Theresa May became prime minister one of the first international trips she took was to India, to try and quickly negotiate a free trade agreement. Her efforts were unsuccessful almost immediately."

Negotiations between United Kingdom and India are usually accompanied by requests for an apology for the 1919 Amritsar massacre and restitution of the Koh-I-Noor diamond, now part of the crown jewels.

"The shared history between India and the United Kingdom has a lot more bitterness associated with it than politicians realise," says Davis. "There's overinflated expectations on what can be achieved with India, and a recurring pattern of getting excited about engagement, getting disappointed, then giving up."

United States

While the United States follows a similar pattern to other English

speaking countries, President Donald Trump can have an unpredictable approach to international relations, and has recently shown a renewed interest in India. He has also been on the receiving end of a 'Modi hug'.

"A look at Trump's tweets before he became a Presidential candidate shows that he viewed India in the terms of business opportunities and admirable Miss Universe contestants," says Davis. "Recently that's changed. India is seen as an ally in the war against terrorism, and there is the expectation on India to offer more support for American efforts in Afghanistan. They're seen as the most important ally in the region."

Shared fears of radical Islam has led to a new link between the United States and India. At the same time it leaves countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh out of this association, despite them having the same shared colonial history of British India.

"Fear of Islam is a strong factor when applying a postcolonial lens to the Indian subcontinent," says Dr Davis. "India is seen as a strong regional ally against Islamic terrorism, and I've never heard of anyone speak of Pakistan and Bangladesh as part of the English speaking world, the way India is talked about." •



Dr Alexander Davis
NGN RESEARCH SCHOLAR, DEPARTMENT
OF POLITICS AND PHILOSOPHY



Indian Migration to Colonial Melbourne

In the 1890s Melbourne was a growing colonial city of the British Empire, home to half a million people and a trade hub linked to the pastoral lands of rural Victoria. The gold rush of the 1850s had attracted a huge influx of settlers from around the world, but by the 1890s there was the onset of a depression, a ‘bust’ that followed the land and property boom of the 1880s.

“Late 19th century migration to Melbourne was primarily coming from Europe and countries within the British Empire, but we can’t ignore the notable presence of Asian migrants,” says Dr Nadia Rhook, a historian from La Trobe University.

“People might be familiar with the substantial numbers of Chinese coming to Melbourne from the 1850s, but less known are the migrants from South Asian and Middle Eastern countries such as India, Afghanistan and Syria. They were often lumped together as ‘Hindoos’ and homogenised in the discourse of early Melbourne, but their voices were an important element of the linguistic landscape.”

Dr Rhook has been working for a number of years to examine the life of Indians in early Melbourne. As fellow subjects of the British Empire, Indians were legally permitted to enter Australia, and a small number came to Melbourne where they could find employment as hawkers and agricultural labourers.

“Much of migration in Melbourne is studied in a post-war context, but it goes back a lot further and is more diverse than the European voices we’re accustomed to hearing,” says Dr Rhook. “To research the colonial language-scape I looked through court records to identify which employed an interpreter - where there’s an interpreter there is language difference at play.”

Dr Rhook spent close to three years looking through every Melbourne court record from the 1890s, and in that time gained an appreciation of the challenges faced by the courts to adequately represent and communicate with those who could not speak English.

“There were instances where the colonial courts struggled to provide an appropriate interpreter, given the number of languages and dialects that were represented within the Melbourne community,” says Dr Rhook. “They weren’t always successful, but there were a number of most trusted and frequently employed interpreters, mostly English born white men, who came to be positioned as respected spokesmen within their communities.”

Hawking was a popular occupation within the South Asian population in colonial Melbourne, as it didn’t cost a lot of capital or come with rents or rates. A hawker would take a cart and sell his wares, sometimes door-to-door, and all that was needed was a license and an ability to sell.

The colonial Victorian government had already made unsuccessful attempts to limit Indian migrants through the hawker license court proceedings. In these courts, Dr Rhook found early manifestations of settler resentment of non-whites. An English language test component was officially included in the hawker license application process in an effort to limit the number of ‘Hindoo’ hawkers.

“There was a perception at the time that English should be the language of the colony, and settlers circulated a racial stereotype that Indians were ‘nuisance ‘Hindoo’ hawkers who can’t speak our language,’” says Dr Rhook. “This formal effort at discrimination was largely unsuccessful, as higher authorities ruled that Indians were subjects of the British Empire, and were allowed to travel between colonies.”

In 1901 Australia became a self ruling dominion of the British empire, and was quick to pass the Immigration Restriction Act which sought to exclude all non-Europeans from Australia. The White Australia Policy formalised a dictation test, in a language chosen at the discretion of the Immigration Officer as part of the migrant application process, putting into practise a similar technique of exclusion to that already trialed in the Hawker’s License Courts.

“Over the next few decades there was a noticeable decrease in the non-white population of Melbourne,” says Dr Rhook. “The net effect was to make it hard, if not impossible, to move in and out of Australia if you weren’t white. It caused much anxiety, pushed families apart, and restricted trade for the local communities that called Australia their home.”

While the White Australia Policy was dismantled by the 1970s, the government are currently taking steps to introduce a compulsory English test alongside the Australian knowledge test as a prerequisite for Australian citizenship.

“The proposed introduction of an English test does raise alarm bells for me. Having spent a lot of time looking at the 1890s and how the ability to speak English became bound up with a white Australian identity this is a worrying indicator of a return to the structures and policies of the White Australia Policy,” says Dr Rhook.

“Of course English is the dominant language of Australia today, but what we see in this is a prescription that migrants should speak English. From a perspective of historical justice we should question that narrative.” ●

THE RELENTLESS INVENTION OF MODERN INDIA

Modern India appears on the threshold of becoming a global power. As it seeks to revitalise its economy, improve the health and education prospects of its citizens, repair its fractious relations with China and Pakistan and make its mark on the global stage, the key to understanding its future lies in understanding its leader.

Prime Minister, Narendra Modi is a controversial figure in his own country and abroad. He has garnered unprecedented political support while facing criticism for his nationalism, his record in government and his economic policies. With his leadership India has enormous potential and equally vast challenges.

La Trobe Asia presented a conversation with Adam Roberts, a journalist for *The Economist* who for five years was the newspaper's South Asia bureau chief. He is the author of *Superfast Primetime Ultimate Nation*, which draws on years of on-the-ground research, and interviews with everyone from fortune-tellers to Modi himself.

Here are a few excerpts from Adam Roberts' remarks.

"In India you can't really get away with an understatement. You've got to be bold, you've got to be strong. You can't be a shrinking violet in India and expect to make an impact. India infects you with its energy and excitement if it doesn't exhaust you."

"What is the potential of India, and why the excitement? The basic potential is its population of 1.3 billion people. Within the next few years it will overtake China. It's a young population, with the median age in the mid-20s, so this is a huge labour force, so India has scale and enthusiasm."

"India's biggest problem is human capital and the failure of the state to deliver what the people need. Healthcare and education across the board is weak and unevenly applied. India's top graduates are in charge of some of the world's most powerful companies, so there's no question of potential, it's giving them the support they need to achieve this."

"In reality and perception there is an enormous amount invested in Modi. He dominates politics in India and has very little credible opposition. But like most leaders of democratic countries his ability to orchestrate real change is limited."

"Narendra Modi was presented as a safe pair of hands to be the prime minister of India, and that hasn't entirely been the case. While he can take some credit for the administration of Gujarat applying that management to an entire country of diverse states is unrealistic."

"The demonetisation of Indian currency of particular was a dramatic step, and emblematic of Modi's strengths and weaknesses. To be fair to him he's not a trained economist, and he's admitted that, but he's a showman and sees policy as theatre. Scrapping the currency has had little positive effect, but was all about bold action and toughness. Modi doesn't see it that way. Despite the negative impact I'm sure he would see it as a great success."

"Modi has done well in elevating the international perception of India. Previously it had been very unpopular amongst its neighbours and poorly integrated into the region. While the rehabilitation has a long way to go there has been good progress. In his first year he took 62 trips and went around the world so that the world could get to know him. A bit narcissistic but that is his understanding of foreign policy." •



Professor Nick Bisley and Adam Roberts on stage at the State Library of Victoria



This issue highlights La Trobe University's diverse research with India.

CONTACT DETAILS

La Trobe Asia
La Trobe University
Melbourne Victoria 3086
Australia
T +61 3 9479 5414
E asia@latrobe.edu.au
Twitter @latrobeasia

