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South Asia is indisputably a major region of the world, yet it still has to become a household name. To most of us “South Asia” describes what simply used to be called “India”, i.e. the lands east of the river Indus (“Sindhu”) and south of the Himalayas. The 1947 partition, however, created a semantic dilemma: All of a sudden India was no longer just the name for the vast tract of land between the deserts of South West and the forests of South East Asia but was also the name of the larger of the two dominions that had been carved out of the “jewel in the crown”. The Pakistan leadership had hoped for another name (“Hindustan”) for the Republic of India and started to insist on a politically more correct label for the area, like “Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent” or “South Asia”. South Asia, however, had been used, if at all, with varying delimitations, ranging from all the lands south of Russia and China, to the belt of states from Afghanistan to Indonesia (as in Gunnar Myrdal’s seminal “Asian Drama”), to “Middle South Asia” including Iran and Afghanistan, and to – finally – the seven founder members of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), i.e. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives. The recent accession of Afghanistan to SAARC should lead again to a new definition of “South Asia”.

Another way of defining a region is by language or culture. But there is no language universally spoken (or at least understood) all over South Asia – except English, and that only by the élite. Indology, thus, deals with a culturally, and not with a politically defined region. Especially in Europe, emphasis is on ancient languages, predominantly Sanskrit. Accordingly, Indologists were – and still are – basically linguists who – for lack of any other area specialists – also deal with general and contemporary affairs, i.e. geography, languages and cultures or the social, economic and political setup. Under these circumstances academics coming from other disciplines would not always feel welcome, especially those with no proficiency in Sanskrit or other classical languages. This became evident in Germany after the South Asia Institute of Heidelberg University, dedicated to applied and interdisciplinary modern South Asian studies, was founded in 1962.

As Professor (emeritus) Dietmar Rothermund, the first President of the European Association of South Asian Studies, narrated in his inaugural speech, it was when his Institute arranged an international seminar on modern South Asia in Herrenalb in 1966 that a participant from England rose in the concluding session and invited everybody to a follow up meeting in Cambridge (1968) that became the First European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies. Ever since, the “European Conferences”, as they came to be known, have been held every two or three years in centres of South Asian studies all over Europe: Helsingöre (2/1970), Heidelberg (3/1972), Sussex (4/1974), Leiden (5/1976), Sévres (6/1978), London (7/1981), Tjellberg (8/1983), Heidelberg (9/1986), Venice (10/1988), Amsterdam (11/1990), Berlin (12/1992), Toulouse (13/1994), Copenhagen (14/1996), Prague (15/1998), Edinburgh (16/2000), Heidelberg (17/2002), Lund (18/2004) and this year in Leiden (19/2006). In the absence of any professional association dealing with modern South Asia it were always individual scholars who volunteered to take up to organize the conferences for an ever growing number of participants, i.e. to set up a programme, to organize a web-site, and to find rooms for plenary sessions and for the many panels. Although all organize their own travel, funding is still a particular problem since the organizers have to depend on the fees that are usually paid late. In a way the wonders of India always extended to the Conferences when one realizes the tremendous efforts of small groups of organizers and volunteers.

From the beginning the Conferences were meant to bring together scholars living in Europe. A “List of Scholars Resident in Europe” was published after each conference. Those who were registered in this

were entitled to an invitation for the next one. Whenever the organizers could manage to get some extra funds from their national research organizations they could pay the fares of some South Asian scholars. They were usually recommended by the conveners of panels who wanted them to contribute papers. Europe is ideally situated to serve as a meeting point for scholars from all over the world. As was to be expected, shifting the venue around Europe resulted in a very different composition of participants, for example with more participants with a South Asian family background when taking place in Great Britain or the attendance of classical Indologists from Eastern Europe when taking place in that region.

The Conferences very much follow the principle of subsidiarity: Participants are encouraged to propose topics for discussion and panel conveners are expected then to organize “their” panels. It is up to them to admit papers and to put them on the Conference web-page; publication is left to the panels to organize themselves. There is no main theme and plenary sessions are few. As the Conferences got larger, the number of panels also grew and the Conferences became an assemblage of mini-conferences, often with overlapping issues and cannibalized attendance: In Leiden 358 participants had the choice of 47 panels altogether and of up to 14 panels at the same time. The keynote speech was given by Sujata Patel (Pune) on “The sociological discourse on religion: Beyond colonial modernity and its binaries”. There was a literary workshop on “Dream vision or realism – Hindi literature at the brink of the twenty-first century”, a plenary discussion on “Bringing together European research on contemporary India”, a roundtable discussion on “Border zones and illicit movements in South Asia” and a public lecture by C. Christine Fair (USIP, Washington) on “US relations with Pakistan and India”.

The conference went without any glitches, the weather was perfect and the small medieval town an ideal place to meet people and to “network”. From the academic point of view, the question would be: what major insights could be won and where South Asian studies in Europe is heading for? A first observation would be that the discipline is highly fragmented and tribalized: The Conferences provide golden opportunities to have a look over the fence of one’s own discipline and specialized area of interest. But even to those who are willing to do so, there are limits as the disciplines are represented quite differently. Economists, for example, have mostly been conspicuous by their absence, with the major exception of those dealing with agricultural economics and rural affairs. There always have been brave attempts to organize panels on the smaller countries of South Asia, especially on Bangladesh. Usually, there was less on Pakistan and fewer panels on Muslim South Asia than one would expect considering the fact that there are more Muslims in South Asia than in any other world region.

Given the smooth working of the Conferences, the absence of an academic body was never felt. That the European Association of South Asian Studies (EASAS) was founded, finally, was basically in response to the European Science Foundation’s offer of post-doc fellowships, to be awarded in cooperation with a professional apex organization. The EASAS also includes classical Indology. Professor (emeritus) Dietmar Rothermund (Heidelberg) is the outgoing first president, followed by Professor (emeritus) Dirk Kolff (Leiden), until then secretary and the convener of the Leiden Conference. The next conference is scheduled to be held in 2008 in Manchester. Information will be available on the web page of the EASAS (www.easas.org) where a list of participants, the programme, most of the abstracts and some of the papers of the Leiden conference can be found. A printed “Programme and book of abstracts” brought out by the IAS (www.ias.nel) and the EASAS (www.easas.org) helped the participants through the conference.