

The South Asia Institute (SAI)

Marcus Nüsser



The SAI building in Neuenheimer Feld

At the start of the 1960s the Baden-Württemberg government sought to set up an interdisciplinary institute for developing-country research in Heidelberg. In the early planning stages no region was singled out. However, after further discussions, it was decided that one region should be selected, thereby bringing together experts in one particular developing area in order to maximise effectiveness. In view of the long tradition of research in Indology at Heidelberg University, the senate decided in a meeting held on the 29 July 1960 to found an “Indo-Asia Institute” with a clear focus on India. The planned profile included not only developing and imparting linguistic competence in research and teaching, but also research in the areas of cultural studies, socio-economics, history, and religion. In addition, the university’s planning commission included the wish for the focus to be on development aid against a background of in-depth knowledge of problem constellations specific to the region.

Structure and location

In the early stages, the Indian president and religious philosopher, S. Radhakrishnan, suggested that India’s neighbouring countries should also be considered when planning and naming the institute and proposed the name South Asia Institute (SAI), the name which is still used today. This broadened the re-

gional focus to the whole of the subcontinent. On 23 May 1962, the SAI, an academic institution of Heidelberg University, was founded by the Theologian Wilhelm Hahn, who later became Minister for Education and Cultural Affairs in Baden-Württemberg, and the Historian Werner Conze. Originally, 14 professorial chairs had been planned, but the financial restrictions which followed meant that in the next six years only eight of these came into being. Development Economics, Ethnology, Geography, History, Indology, International Development and Agricultural Policy in developing countries, Political Science, Tropical Hygiene, and Public Health were all covered. In addition to the departments of Modern Languages and Literature, Archaeology, History of Art, Religious Studies, and Law came a series of research areas which were without professorial chairs. The founding and expansion of this model regional institute came at a favourable time when political decisions could rapidly be put into practice. After the recession of 1967 and the university clashes in the late 1960s, the establishment of a similar foundation would almost certainly not have been possible.

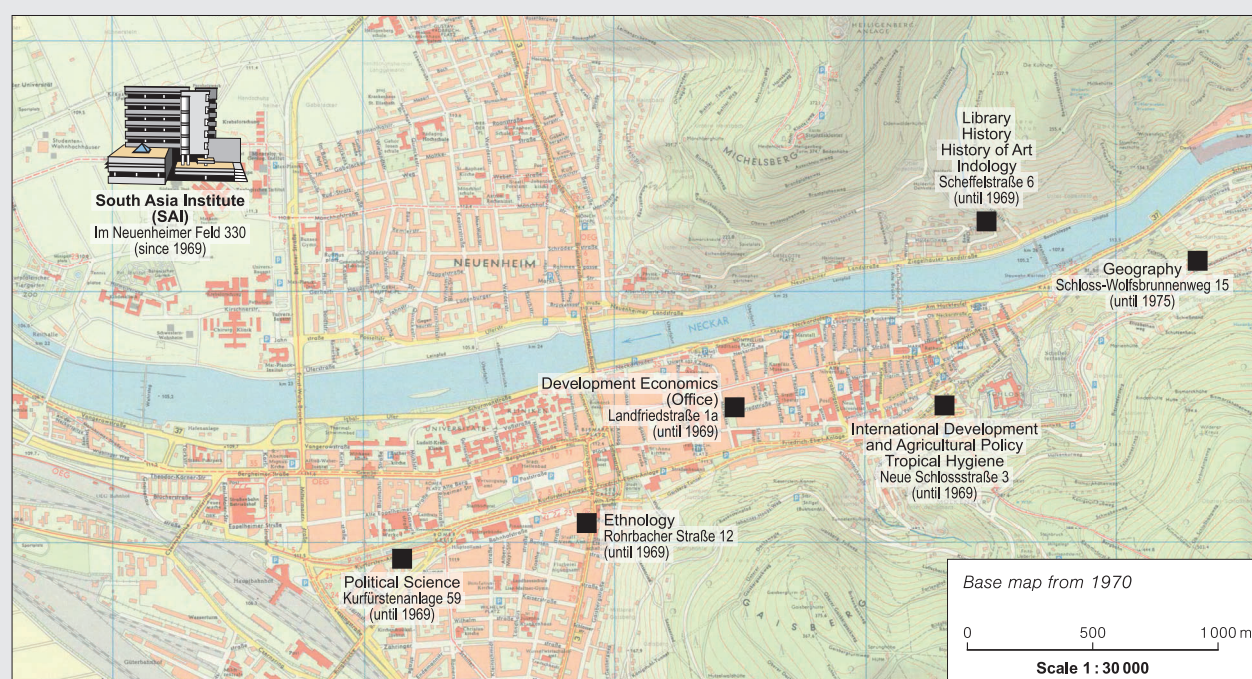
Until autumn 1969, the individual departments of the institute were spread over six buildings in Heidelberg ①. The move to the new building in Neuenheimer Feld 330 (► image) meant that the SAI’s areas of study were concen-

trated on one site, bringing opportunity for a consolidation of interdisciplinary exchange within the framework of problem orientated regional studies. The department of South Asian Geography was the last to move to Neuenheimer Feld, leaving Schloss-Wolfsbrunnengasse in 1975, when the departments of Tropical Hygiene and Public Health were relocated to extended rooms in the Department of Theoretical Medicine. Although the SAI had been conceived and structured to be multidisciplinary (and still is today) there were, especially in the early days, problems in putting this into practice. Not least, this was because of the limited experience in multidisciplinary co-operation of those involved. Towards the end of 1991 the future of the SAI became uncertain. However, the threat of several vacant professorships led the rectorate to commission a group of external academics to evaluate the institute and make recommendations on whether or not it should close. In July 1992, the group presented a positive report with clear recommendations for the future orientation and relevant specialisation of the individual professorial chairs. This led to an appointment process involving five lists of candidates from different disciplines.

South Asian branch offices

The SAI branch offices in the subcontinent have served as important bridging points for the institute’s research foci and political representation. They mirror the need for representation of the institute and the intensity of the research activity of the individual countries in the focus region at different times ②. The branch office in New Delhi has provided the SAI with representation in India since 1962. The Indian-German agreement gave it permanent status as an academic and cultural establishment in the largest country on the subcontinent. Further branch offices were to be set up according to needs. In 1967 a second branch office was established in the Afghan capital, Kabul. This served as a refuge base for numerous German academics until the Soviet invasion in 1979. After this abrupt end to the research centre in Afghanistan, the extensive library was saved in a dramatic operation and transported over the Khyber-Pass to Pakistan. In response to the loss of the office in Afghanistan, along with the resulting →

① Departments of the South Asia Institute (SAI) since 1962 locations



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Cartographer: A. Müller

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Author: M. Nüsser





Nomads in the Pakistani Himalayas

increase in research projects in Pakistan, the SAI set up a new office in Islamabad in the following year. This remained until 1984.

In the course of increased research activity in Nepal in the 1980s, the SAI decided to open a further branch office in Kathmandu in 1984. This is still in operation today. In 1999 an additional office was opened in Colombo. However, an escalation in the civil war in Sri Lanka resulted in its closure in 2007. In order to maintain academic contact during times of political uncertainty, the branch offices in Pakistan and Sri Lanka were run in a reduced form by local representatives.

South Asian partner institutions

In addition to the branch offices, the “Memoranda of Understanding” with universities and non-university research institutions in South Asia has an important role to play. Not only does it serve as the basis for necessary research approval, it also provides a crucial place for the building of cross-nation academic networks. The current (11/2010) partnerships show a high concentration in the Indian capital, where there are seven renowned academic institutions.

The SAI's research projects

During the course of the past five decades, the individual departments of the South Asia Institute have carried out research projects in almost all countries and regions of the subcontinent **2**. Despite principally concentrating on the core South Asian countries (India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lan-

ka), research has also been carried out by various departments in other world regions not shown in the diagram **3**. In the first three decades in particular, the term South Asia covered a broader area, as is clearly illustrated by the areas studied at that time (e.g. Turkey, Thailand, New Zealand, and Australia). Since being founded, the SAI has carried out no research projects in Bhutan or the Maldives. The distribution of projects shown on the map represents the regional interests of the various professors **4** and also the political instability in individual countries and limited opportunities to work caused by this during different phases in history. Only a representative selection of projects can be shown since some individual projects covered whole countries or had a national perspective. From the start there has been a marked emphasis on India **3**. In Afghanistan, all academic activity came to a complete halt in the second decade (1973-1982). In the recent past, the number of research projects in Pakistan has declined, whereas the number of projects carried out in Nepal and Sri Lanka has remained relatively constant. Research in Bangladesh has been limited.

With the introduction of support from the collaborative research centre “South Asia” (SFB 16) came the first opportunities for large-scale interdisciplinary research projects. The Benares Project, which since 2000 has been supported with money from the DFG, has been involved in investigating the connections between religious and indigenous cartography as well as between

3 South Asia Institute (SAI) research activities 1962-2010

Research region South Asia by country



Nations accounted for in research by the South Asia Institute 1962-2010

- throughout the whole period
- with interruption
- not yet accounted for

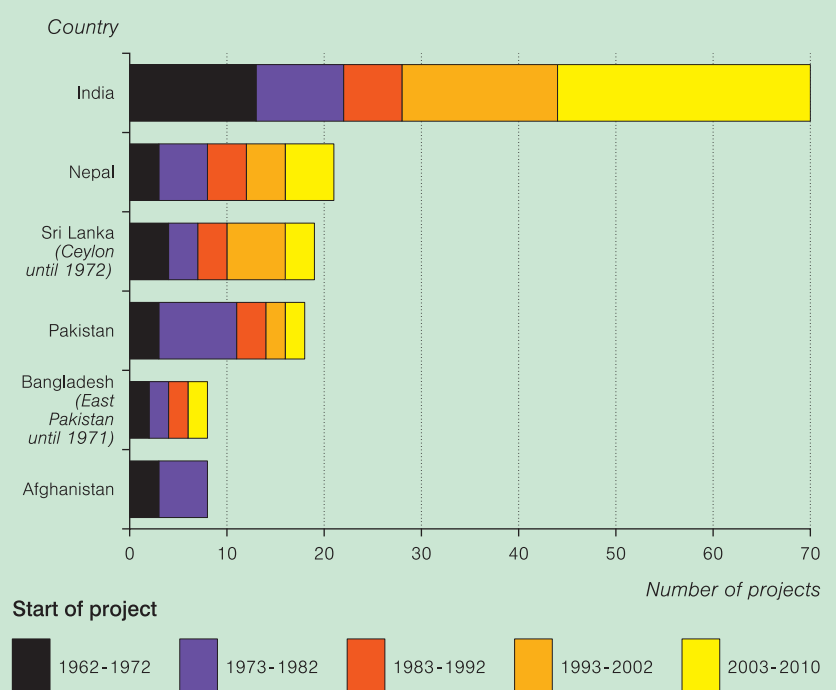
- international boundary
- - - - - disputed boundary line
- capital city

international boundaries and names
as in 2010

KIRG. Kirgistan
TJK. Tajikistan
USB. Usbekistan

Scale 1 : 40 000 000

South Asia Institute research projects by country and decade



Start of project

- 1962-1972
- 1973-1982
- 1983-1992
- 1993-2002
- 2003-2010

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Author: M. Nüsser

topographical maps. This project has given rise to other interdisciplinary co-operation within the SAI. Since 2002, the SAI has played an important role in the Heidelberg cultural studies collaborative research centre “*Ritual Dynamics*” (SFB 619). In 2007, within the bounds

of the excellence initiative, additional funding was received for research into the area “*Asia and Europe in a Global Context: Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows*”. Several departments within the SAI are involved, and it has allowed large-scale interdisciplinary and

cross-cultural research to be undertaken. In 2009 the staff of the SAI was further increased through the donation of two professorial chairs funded by the Indian (“Heinrich Zimmer Chair for Indian Philosophy and Intellectual History”) and Pakistani (Alama-Iqbal-Fellowship) governments. These posts have each been filled for two years by renowned scholars from these countries. In addition, the activities of the oldest branch office, in Delhi, have been expanded and strengthened since 17 November 2009 by the commitment of the Ruperto Carola with the found-

ing of the “Heidelberg Center South Asia”. The opening ceremony of the centre was attended by the rector, Bernhard Eitel. Imparting intercultural competence is a central part of the institutes teaching.
In view of the enormous growth in the economic and cultural importance of the Southern Asia region, in particular India, as well as the extensive political instability in various countries in the subcontinent, the founding of the SAI almost 50 years ago has proved to be an act of great foresight.♦

4 Tenured professors of the departments of the South Asia Institute (SAI) 1962-2010

