NATIONALISM, DEMOCRACY

AND COLONIAL URBANISM IN INTERWAR SOUTH-ASIA

UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM

WORKSHOP APRIL 13TH 2012

This one day workshop was funded by the School of Humanities and IAPS at the University of Nottingham and the Centre for Urban History at the University of Leicester. It was brought together in collaboration with the recently re-launched Urban Culture Network and aimed at facilitating discussion amongst South Asianists regarding the role of the urban in rethinking nationalism and democratic reform in inter-war South Asia (although the papers focused on India specifically). This is very much an understudied element within South Asian Studies, which was reflected in the diverse origins and interests of the speakers. “Nationalism” and the “city” were often peripheral objects of interest within the speakers’ larger research projects, and the day presented an opportunity to bring these interests into focus and discussion. The papers were as follows:

* **Stephen Legg** (University of Nottingham): Spatial Histories and Affective Geographies: Forms and Narratives of Nationalism in Colonial Delhi
* **Justin Jones** (University of Exeter): Nationalism in the City, and the City in Nationalism: Lucknow as Political Centre, 1919-1939
* **Eleanor Newbigin** (SOAS): Constructing the 'Urban' Colonial Subject: Taxation and Representation in Interwar India
* **Anish Vanaik** (University of Oxford): An Arena of Government: Encroachment, Public Spaces and Municipal Politics in Colonial Delhi
* **Prashant Kidambi** (University of Leicester): Nationalism and Municipal Politics in inter-war Bombay City
* **William Gould** (University of Leeds): Patronage, Publicity and the Black Market: The Politics of Food and Civil Supply and ‘Anti-Corruption’ in 1940s United Provinces cities

Stephen Legg’s paper set the scene by recapping something of the history of anti-colonial nationalism and the city in existing literature and by summarising the historical and historiographical difficulties associated with studying such a still-controversial topic as “nationalism” in India. Themes were selected from this literature that might suggest a way of moving out from a more political or social history/geography of nationalism to think about its affects, embodiments and rhythms within the city. Some of these lenses were then used to demonstrate how he is currently working through archival materials on Delhi’s nationalist movement with an eye to mapping and exploring the spaces of anti-colonialism in the city.

The following session examined the city as a literary and an economic space. Justin Jones examined Lucknow’s changing fortunes as the capital of the United Provinces from the 1920s onwards. His translation of essays from the period reflecting on courtly culture allowed an examination of nostalgia and “political fashions” of the time that inflected the hosting of political Pacts and Congress Sessions in the city. Eleanor Newbigin approached a broader range of cities through an exploration of income tax reform, which marked a contested intervention into the revenue potential of Indian cities, providing an understudied frame for many nationalist mobilisations of the interwar period. Broader contexts of imperial revenue reform were tied in to the intricate discussions about the Hindu Undivided Family as both a private and a public space and institution.

The two papers after lunched considered municipal politics and the urban. Anish Vanaik considered Delhi’s Municipal Committee as a non-political space due to its commodification, the empty time and abstract space of which presented an under-acknowledge grid to the affective structures of nationalism. These suggestions prefaced a discussion of the gendered imagery of the nationalist city and the different spatial and temporal techniques adopted by “political” and “religious” nationalists. Prashant Kidambi considered the municipal corporation of Bombay, undertaking a detailed consideration of the nationalist politics in the municipal sphere in the late colonial era. This included debates about patronage and the ‘anti-democratic’ nature of the colonial state as well as the ambiguities and paradoxes of nationalist engagement with municipal politics.

William Gould concluded the presentations with a study extending into the 1940s and the post-colonial 1950s, linking later scandals and controversies about famine policies and food supplies to earlier structures of bureaucracy and moral economies of anti-corruption that had been mapped out, city by city, by the colonial state. We concluded the day with a roundtable discussion as to what questions might inform our future debates about the urban, nationalism and democracy in colonial India (and hopefully South Asia). Prashant Kidambi made some opening remarks commenting on three lines of debate we might pursue:-

1. Intersections: our common interests in, for instance, space, symbolism, networks, identity and the city, democracy-citizenship-rights, and markets/capitalisation
2. Analytical questions: what does the urban variable bring to our analysis? How is it period specific? What is the relevant frame for understanding nationalism?
3. Sources: how do we problematise as well as publicise and share the archives (in the broadest sense) that we use? How might we pool lists of available archives to help each other in our research?

Stephen Legg also provided some questions which were also taken up in discussion, covering:-

1. Change and the city in terms of
   1. Time: how cities materially change over the periods we are looking at, and how contemporary theories about the city evolved across various registers (sanitary science to hygiene, ecologies to arithmetic of planning, and evolving nationalist thoughts about the corrupting or improving nature of the city
   2. Space: how we theorise the non-western city. Much work has gone into thinking theories of nationalism outside the west, what about the city?
2. Definitions: does the city have coherence across the range of approaches demonstrated today, ie, as a unit of socio-politics; literature, language and imagination; finance; commodification; municipal politics; and food provision?
3. Comparativism: how do we combine the detail of micro-studies with the comparativism to make the relevance of these details clear? What collaborations can facilitate this?

Points raised in the following discussion with the participants included:

* What is the place of the urban? How do we conceive of cities as both local and, for instance, imperial at the same time?
* How do we think beyond “South Asian” as “Indian”? How was the urban thought of in relation to the ‘rural’ in places like Ceylon?
* How do we retain an emphasis on the flux and change of the city?
* How do we capture the awareness of the urban, the “public” and the municipal?
* Where does class, and Marxist interpretations of the city as both economic and cultural space, fit?