

CONCEPT NOTE FOR THE ASIA ANNUAL 2013 PUBLICATION AND A CONFERENCE PRECEDING THE PUBLICATION

'MARGINS' AND 'MARGINAL COMMUNITIES' IN THE ASIAN PERSPECTIVE: IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE

The notions of 'margins' vis-a-vis multiplicity, plurality, heterogeneity and uneven human development have been throwing challenges to states, policy makers, social scientists, intellectuals and members of civil society. While discussing the socio-cultural location of a group of people or communities, extant literature tends to adopt certain categories such as 'dominant', 'minority', 'indigenous', 'tribe', 'ethnic', "aboriginal" 'backward', and/or 'subaltern' and 'excluded' to define the social existence and power relations of people in a given society. Keeping the 'dominant' within a fixed definitive framework, almost all other variables are used to describe the lesser communities living in the margins of a society. However, the concept of 'margin' may vary in different geographical, historical, socio-political contexts. The present conference and publication will address the notions of 'margins' and 'marginality' within the different political contexts of Asian countries. We seek to situate the struggle of marginal communities against dominant and hegemonic national cultures within a larger transnational Asian perspective.

For centuries, marginal communities have been primarily the domain of ethnographers and social anthropologists, more so in post-colonial countries. Imperialist literature produced conceptual idioms like 'aboriginal', 'ethnic', 'tribal' etc to chronicle their cultures and thereby segregated them as 'others' who live on the fringes of mainstream society. Or, they have been formulated as subjects for political observers and become the mainstay of interest of a politically correct civil society. Such approaches are consequences of an active principle of exclusion.

Ranajit Guha and the subaltern group of historians, for the first time, produced serious critiques of the dominant narratives that segregated the marginalised voices from the 'elitist' discourses. Primarily in the Indian context the subaltern historians foregrounded an alternative perspective to study history and society through the recognition of marginal voices behind insurgencies, movements or resistance against the colonial/nationalist state. Over a couple of decades, the subaltern historians became successful in situating marginal voices within an alternative discursive structure. However, the concerns of the subaltern historians are generally confined within the anti-imperialist struggle in India within the paradigms of colonialism and nationalism.

This publication, however, seeks to cast a gaze at marginality beyond colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism. It will engage in raising certain basic questions:

- (a) How the notion of the ‘marginal’ is socio-historically created and how it functions in a given social order?
- (b) Who belongs to the ‘margins’—can the definition be based on caste, class, race, religion, language, sex, economic status, social differentiation and occupation status relationship?
- (c) Are the marginal communities always economically backward, culturally vulnerable and socially excluded? Or, is there an uneven pattern of marginality? How can marginality be defined if there is an uneven pattern? Can the words “minority” and “marginality” be interchangeable? Or one may identify some people who are excluded from a predetermined minority status but still can be termed marginal?
- (d) Where is gender situated in the margins of Asian countries?

We seek to understand how ‘marginal communities’ are multidimensional. This conference invites contributions which will show how this multidimensionality operates in Asian regions. And we also desire to understand the benefits of this multidimensionality of the marginal, of marginal identities and sub-identities which refuse to get assimilated within larger structural frameworks. While Asia has been drawn as a boundary, for practical reasons, we hope the discussion will be region specific and not country specific. Thus we invite contributions from four major regions – (a) South Asia, (b) Central Asia, (c) West Asia, and (d) South East Asia.