

The Department of Sociology

University of Mumbai

is organizing a South Asia conference on

**Modernity, Identity and Resistance in South Asia :  
Negotiating Subjectivity amidst changing Solidarities.**

On

11<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> March 2010

At

J. P. Naik Bhavan University of Mumbai Kalina Campus

Vidhyanagri Santa Cruz East Mumbai

**Modernity, Identity and Resistance in South Asia :**  
**Negotiating Subjectivity amidst changing Solidarities.**

At a time when societies across the world are faced with unprecedented levels of interconnectedness both economic and cultural, contemporary Sociology in particular and the Social Sciences in general have are faced with major challenges that question age old certainties, including what hitherto had been termed as Sociological knowledge. There is little agreement on who is the subject of sociological enquiry; there is even less agreement about situating subject actors within metanarratives of order, change and transformation. Nowhere is this more sharply visible than in scholarly engagements with Modernity and its discontents in different regions of the world. From unilinear histories of 'early and late modernizers', to the developmental logic of three worlds, to the ethnocentrism of western civilization, the universalist claims of Modernity have persistently and consistently been challenged by those who are marginalized, displaced and excluded. Clearly Modernity in this sense is constitutive of an historical experience of the diverse ways in which subject actor/s as both recipients and active agents of modernity give expression to their subjectivity.

It is this historical experience of Modernity in the context of South Asia that will serve as the broad canvas on which the conference will deliberate, interrogate and critically reflect on. This unique engagement with modernist ideas and practices as these emerged from the West spanning nearly five centuries was inaugurated by the colonization of the subcontinent, beginning with the Portuguese colonization of Goa. If western scholars came to characterize this uniqueness by emphasizing the persistence of Tradition, their counterparts in the subcontinent came to see it as the valorisation of Tradition. Notwithstanding this overemphasis on Tradition, colonial rule had succeeded in establishing a host of modern Institutions like the administration, judiciary, education, the press etc, all over the subcontinent, which continue to serve as the milieu for understanding the course of modernity in contemporary south Asia. These engagements with what some would call the emerging public sphere were diverse, often reflecting the deep rooted divisions and antagonisms amongst the different social and cultural groups in the subcontinent. Nowhere is this more clearly visible than in the anti colonial struggles in South Asia. Scholars from nationalist and subaltern perspectives have sought to emphasize the radically different ways in which the different actors who received modernist ideas and practices

responded to the call for overthrowing colonial rule. Caste, Religion, Ethnicity, Region, Class and Gender continued to be the enduring fault lines which marked out the sites of contestation and resistance within post colonial South Asian societies as well. Even if, as some would argue, modernity wore very thin and existed only on the surface in society, for different social groups the response to modernity was very different. If for the wealthy upper castes it was a way of reinventing caste domination and control, for the lower castes it was using the language of Rights to mobilize and resist upper caste oppression. In other regions communalism and ethnic strife came to take a severe toll on state and civil society bringing to the fore issues concerning the place of religion in the secular life of the State. In yet other regions, armed conflict against the State continues unabated revealing the deeply inegalitarian nature of economic development and the majoritarian emphasis of cultural nationalism. Gender relations and the rights of women have been a critical terrain upon which the battle for modernity has been played out in all the regions of the subcontinent, albeit within varied frameworks and dynamics. If modernity was about undoing old solidarities and replacing them with newer solidarities rooted in conceptions of social arrangements that were both universalist and inclusivist, such a project of social transformation has arguably remained largely legalistic and instrumental. The compartmentalization of the self that this signifies, reveals the inability of socialization practices to enable internalization of the lifestyle and world view of the moderns.

By placing emphasis on the task of negotiating subjectivity in the everyday world of social relations, we wish to underline the constructivist nature of this engagement, setting aside the determinisms and binaries that characterize the discourse of modernity in South Asia. The coexistence of incompatibilities within subject actors' experience offers us an opportunity to re-examine the givens of modernity, while at the same time widening its discourse to include those who have hitherto been excluded from its sphere. At its core, this engagement is marked by a resistance of social actors to their inclusion or exclusion from the experience of modernity. These modes of resistance are both overt and collective expressions of solidarities, equally they are covert and private, drawing boundaries on the extent to which modernist ideas and practices can be internalized within subject consciousness. Quite clearly then the historical experience of modernity in South Asia raises serious questions that implicate not only subject actors and their experience, in equal measure they also implicate the existing knowledge of modernity and its claims to represent the social realities of South Asian societies.

What do these historical experiences of subjectivity and its assertion of Identity tell us about modernity in South Asia? How do we understand the

dynamic interplay of solidarities old and new ? Does the pattern of contestation and resistance of subject actor/s amount to a unique experience of modernity in South Asia? What are the common motifs, symbolisms and practices that may account for a South Asian modernity in comparison to other regions and their experience of modernity in the age of globalization? These are some of the questions the conference would seek to address

The conference will invite paper presentation and panel discussion on the following main themes

#### Modernity and its critique in South Asia

This theme will basically deal with interrogating existing ideas and theories that dominate the discourse of modernity in South Asia by both local and international scholarship. There is a rich corpus of writings in this field ranging from the modernization studies of the 1950's to the post colonial writings of the 1980's. Of equal importance are the debates concerning modernity making the case for alternative modernities or multiple modernities

#### Changing Solidarities, Emerging Identities

This theme will examine what are the different kinds of solidarities that have emerged in civil and political society with a view to understanding what are the new identities that are shaping subject actors experience of modernity within society. The rise of interest based groups based on one or another identity like class religion, ethnicity, gender including more recent formations to do with issues of environment, migration, displacement informal labour etc will be examined. . To what extent and how do premodern and modern identities coexist within these emerging solidarities?

#### The place of Hierarchy within South Asian modernity

This theme will principally examine the phenomenon of Caste and caste hierarchies in modern south asian societies. Enough scholarly work has been done to prove the existence of caste based or caste-like hierarchies in all the different countries of South Asia. Caste has been found to be practiced among all the different religious groupings in South Asia. Is Homo Hierarchicus antithetical to the ideas and values of modernity ? To what extent does the old system of patronage and dominance survive and to what extent has it reinvented itself in the modern context? Is Hierarchy intrinsic to an understanding of modernity in South Asia?.

#### Nations and Regions

This theme will investigate the nature of pluralism and diversity in modern South Asia. It will examine the extent to which ideas associated with Unity in

Diversity are still tenable in both State and civil society in South Asia. All South Asian countries are faced with ethnic and regional movements seeking autonomy or secession from the existing nations of which they are a part. To what extent can the assertions of such groups be justified either economically or culturally? Economic migration in various parts of South Asia has led to the problem of outsider – insider. Has the concept of the Nation State proved limiting in the case of South Asian societies?

#### Majoritarianism and the minorities

This theme will examine the ways in which majoritarianism functions within a democratic setting taking into account the minorities of different kinds that exist in south asian societies. The dominant role of the majority has constantly threatened the minority. Communalism, and fundamentalism of different hues has constantly sought extra constitutional ways to achieve their ends. Equally impossible has been the ability of the State to enact uniform laws for all its citizens. To what extent has majoritarianism entrenched and hardened the differences between the communities of South Asia?. As one scholar put it, Is modernity in South Asia about “living together separately”?.

#### Gender as the terrain and trope for modernity

The ‘status of women’ has been a prominent issue that actuated the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century social reform movements in the subcontinent , although the limited nature of this engagement has been critiqued, In the subsequent nationalist phase and first decades of independence, the rights of women were complacently assumed to have been achieved. Only after the 1970s have women’s movements re-emerged . In the context of religious fundamentalism, both minority and majority driven, and in the context of neo-liberal globalization, the issue of women’s rights have got articulated in the mainstream political discourses of South Asia as on the one hand symbols of (reinvented) tradition and (western) modernity, and on the other hand as a conflict between community and individual rights. This theme will examine these dynamics as a context for women’s activism .

#### Resisting / Reinventing Modernity

This theme will look at the different ways in which subject actors collectively engage either with the givens of modernity or in turn are engaged with representing modernity involving greater universality and wider inclusion. Anti caste movements, anti poverty movements, peasant and landless movements against capitalist development, human Rights movements, women’s movements etc. What do these responses from civil society tell us about the nature of modernity in South Asian societies? Is the

democratization resulting from such resistance movements changing our perception and understanding of modernity in South Asia?

### Presentations

Research papers are invited from scholars both within India, other regions of South Asia as well as International Scholars working on South Asia. An abstract of not more than 200 words should be sent to any of the email addresses given below not later than 1<sup>st</sup> December 2009. Notification of acceptance will be given by December 15, 2009.

Full papers should be emailed by 1<sup>st</sup> February 2010. No submissions will be accepted after this date. At the end of the Conference we propose to bring out the proceedings as a publication of the Department of Sociology.

Participants from outside India are welcome. However, because of the paucity of funds, it will not be possible for the Department to provide any financial support.

Participants from within India presenting papers will be provided with travel and hospitality by the University. While Scholars from South Asia presenting papers will be provided with hospitality, efforts are on to organize funds to pay for their travel. For those participants from outside India not presenting papers but who wish to participate in the conference proceedings, the department will be glad to help them find accommodation etc. if a request is made in advance.

### Registration

All participants to the conference would have to be registered.

Participants within India and South Asia	Rs. 300	Before Feb 15 <sup>th</sup> 2010
	Rs.500	After Feb 15 <sup>th</sup> 2010
International participants		Before Feb 15 <sup>th</sup> 2010 US\$ 75
		After Feb 15 <sup>th</sup> 2010 US\$ 100
International Students		US\$ 50

### Contact Details

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### Organizing Committee

The Conference Organizing Committee consists of

Dr. Kamala Ganesh Head of Department

Dr. E. Rodrigues – Conference Coordinator

Dr. S. M. Michael – Co-Coordinator

Dr. P. S. Vivek – Co- Coordinator

Dr. Indra Munshi

Dr. P. G. Jogdand

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