

Report on Sephis-sponsored Trip to India

I was recently given funding as part of the Sephis Small Grants Programme (South-South Linkages) to undertake a trip to India. I traveled in India for three weeks (Jan 2-25) and spent a week each in Bangalore, Kolkata and Delhi.

The research formed part of a book I am writing, provisionally entitled *The Globe in the Text: A Transnational History of the Book*.

Briefly put, this book asks how one might conceptualize and research the history of the book as a transnational enterprise. This project suggests that the core issue is to problematize the idea of a transnational audience. Existing analyses either take this idea to be self-evident and/or explain it via technicist interpretations, which see the spread of books (and other forms of communication) as creating a transnational audience in their wake. To reformulate such understandings, we must firstly historicize the idea of the transnational audience and then, track (across time and space) the forms of reading, circulation and textual production brought into being on its behalf.

The context for the study will be the anglophone nineteenth-century Protestant mission world, one particularly clear instance of a transnational reading public. Within this domain, there will be three areas of geographical focus: England, southern Africa and India.

The trip to India had three objectives (1) to undertake archival research (2) to deliver lectures (3) to develop intellectual links with academics in India.

Archival Research

The major focus of research was the archive of the United Theological College in Bangalore. This archive has excellent holdings on a range of Protestant missions in India. I concentrated on reading material pertaining to book and tract distribution and the reading formations associated with these. I was able to consult both published and unpublished record of the following organizations:

Christian Literature Society in Madras (1839-1862)

Madras Religious Tract and Book Society (1866-1903)

Calcutta Tract Society (1846-1870).

I also visited the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society in Bangalore and met with Dr Tejaswini Niranjana and Dr S. V. Srinivas.

While in Bangalore, I also made contact with the Bangalore Bible Society and met with Revd G D V Prasad, a historian of the Bible Society in India.

Kolkata

In Kolkata, I worked in the National Library where I was able to read some the extensive material on the history of print culture in India. This field of study is well developed in India and has lead to sophisticated theorization around the formation of public spheres. In a situation where the history of printing, publishing and the book is only beginning to emerge systematically in African Studies, this material, much of which is not easily available in South Africa, is of immense value.

I presented a paper, "The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of *The Pilgrim's Progress*" at the Centre for the Study of Social Science. In addition to meeting

the staff of the Centre and seeing their visual archive, I meet Dr Rimi Chatterjee, a leading scholar in the history of the book in India.

Delhi

I presented two papers: one entitled “Dreams, Documents and Passports to Heaven: African Christian Interpretations of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*” at the Centre for Historical Studies, at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and a second (“The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*”) at the History Department, Delhi University.

At both universities, I met a range of colleagues in History and English. We pursued useful discussions in terms of advancing an emerging comparative Indian/Southern African studies project in which the historiographies of the two areas will be brought into closer and more systematic dialogue.

In terms of advancing South/South linkages, the trip had tremendous benefits. The major one of these was to develop and advance the possibility of a more systematic dialogue between Southern African and Indian Studies. At the same time, in visiting India, I became better acquainted with the depth, sophistication and range of its indigenous scholarship and publishing. Very often, this scholarship is not visible from South Africa where instead the traditions of Indian scholarship that are best known are those mediated via the North American (and to a lesser extent) the British academy. This work is of course justifiably famous. However, much of it is increasingly written for a ‘northern’ metropolitan audience. The material produced in India is often aimed primarily at an Indian audience and so has a depth of complexity sometimes missing from those texts intended for a US or UK readership where intricacies and subtleties must at times be blunted.

Tanika Sarkar captures this situation well. There is currently, she says, “a received wisdom on colonial studies” that identifies a “singular structure of colonial knowledge as the originary moment for all possible kinds of power and disciplinary formations.” This approach produces “a monolithic, unstratified colonized subject ... absolved of all complicity and culpability in the makings of structures of exploitation.” She continues: “As a result, the lone political agenda for a historiography of this period shrinks into native contestations of colonial knowledge – since all power supposedly flows from this single source. Every species of contestation, by the same token, is taken to be equally valid” (192-3). The range, depth and complexity of Indian scholarship holds out the possibility of an enriching dialogue with various traditions of southern African studies.

References

Sarkar, Tanika. 2003. *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*. Delhi: Permanent Black.