

### **Cultivating Futures: Ethnographies of Alternative Agricultures in (South) Asian Landscapes of Crisis**

**Veranstalter:** Cluster of Excellence „Asia and Europe in a Global Context“, Heidelberg University

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Terms like „alternative“ and „crisis“ have become frequently used in agrarian studies. But what does it actually mean to be „alternative“? Who needs „alternatives“? And can „alternatives“ be seen as hope? For two days of scholarly exchange, an interdisciplinary workshop on „Cultivating Futures: Ethnographies of Alternative Agricultures in (South) Asian Landscapes of Crisis“ examined such questions as well as the transcultural dynamics in the interplay of knowledge, technologies, power and economics. This workshop was organized by the Junior Research Group „Agrarian Alternatives“ at Heidelberg University and speakers and attendees came from various universities, institutes and organizations in Europe, Asia and the United States.

The keynote lecture by GLENN DAVIS STONE (Washington University) addressed the issues of power, experiment and knowledge in Indian agriculture. In the context of the advancement of genetically modified crops, Stone focused on the contested notion of farmers' „Indigenous Knowledge“ in India. It is considered marginalized as the new seed technologies reduce the possibility of localized seed trials, but yet it remains integral to the revival of alternative forms of agriculture.

The Panel „Political Economy, Science and Knowledge“ entailed talks by DANIEL MÜNSTER (Heidelberg University) and BARBARA HARRISS-WHITE (University of Oxford). After Münster introduced the Junior Research Group, Harriss-White presented her research on different methods of development and examined where, how and why physical, social and economic variables interact by

focusing especially on different types of rice-cultivation in India. In her presentation, she focused on „expert“ versus „situated“ knowledge of the individuals involved and examined possible alternative micro-level methods that could be usefully applied elsewhere, including advanced economies. Yet, as each method examined had its particular advantages and disadvantages, her provisional results showed that there was no method that was clearly superior to the others. Hence, according to her, it is always useful for researchers to consult the marginal farmers who hold traditional/indigenous knowledge when investigating agrarian alternatives.

The next panel on „Agrarian Innovation and Rural Uncertainty“ included talks by ANDREW FLACHS (Washington University) and SHAMBU C. PRASAD (Institute of Management). In his presentation, Flachs focused on the dimensions of sustainable knowledge, which included the question whether farmers in Telangana can trial new seeds and technology and then use the knowledge gained to improve future farming methods. In this context he addressed different types of learning (social, environmental, institutional) and stated that the farmers tended to rely on the knowledge provided by shopkeepers while the trials at the village level were mainly driven by larger and wealthier farmers with better resources. Yet there were still some farmers that have continued to save seeds and breed their own hybrids. Flachs stated that in places where knowledge was not easily accessible farmers went for the safest choice which is planting the same seeds as their local colleagues.

Against the backdrops of the Green Revolution, increased erosion of the local specificity of agriculture, indigenous „de-skilling“ and farmers' subsequent dependence on external inputs, Prasad's talk focused on the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) as a socio-technical movement. Based on his research in Uttarakhand and Orissa, he stressed that the new method was tested and adapted in local conditions, implying a huge amount of indigenous experimentation and learning. Prasad emphasized the social aspects and changes accompanying this process. For him, the alternative agrarian method seems to account for

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re-skilling and the empowerment of women and marginal farmers, as well as for innovation and experimentation in situ.

The Panel „Heritage Alternatives“ comprised the talks of SUNITA RAO (Vanastree Seed Saving Collective) and SAEED HALDULE (Heidelberg University). Rao, the founder of the women farmers' collective Vanastree, called herself a „barefoot ecologist“ (as a non-academic ecologist) and presented the chief characteristics and initiatives of her local organization. She pointed out that its work could be perceived as a form of „alternative agriculture“ and as a response to male dominated land ownership and deforestation. She explained that the organization provides experimental and place-based immersive eco-cultural learning programs, conducts research and documentation on seeds, sells food and seed products, integrates multicasest and provides livelihood to the individuals involved. In her opinion, these activities complement the research conducted at universities and academic or government institutions.

Haldule presented topics surrounding the rapid changes in food and agricultural legislations in India that are part of her dissertation. She outlined the effects on „seed networking“ among small and marginal farmers as well as for community seed banks as traditional instruments for coping with resource insecurity and environmental uncertainty, enhancing biodiversity and fostering the empowerment of women. She concluded that similar disrupting effects on the rural populace have to be expected as were seen in the aftermath of the Green Revolution. Thus, she holds the view that the social dynamic has been almost completely neglected in the course of formulating and implementing new legislations.

The last panel on the first day, „Comparative Perspectives on Alternative Agriculture“ featured a talk by PETER VANDERGEEST (York University) and led to the „Final Discussion.“ As opposed to the majority of the speakers at the conference, whose works were centered on India, Vandergeest engaged with the development of alternative agriculture in Thailand and its various effects on livelihoods. He highlighted the peculiarities that shaped Thailand's development

and stated that in this context, „organic“ has taken on many „social lives“ ranging from the imposition of international standards to the rise of local projects. The speaker also shed light on the cultural distance between modern urban middle class consumers, selecting internationally certified organic food which is produced by the corporate agrofood sector, and small-scale local farmers who produce these goods, thus accentuating the globalized and internationally connected character of the food market.

In the concluding discussion, the topics of the presentations were successfully integrated into a larger framework of interdisciplinary and trans-regional research. CHRISTIAN STRÜMPPELL (Heidelberg University) added the perspective of an ethnographer of economic transformation by reminding the audience of the power relations involved and suggested to work out the political economy behind the themes discussed. By pointing out that the states' agency was presented in most papers, RAJESWARI S. RAINA (NISTADS-CSIR) reflected on the different ways how (and by whom) agrarian alternatives could be promoted. Further, she alluded to the broader issues of planetary limits, globalization, and potential (export) markets. Referring to her studies in Canada and Nicaragua, BIRGIT MÜLLER (LAIOS Paris) offered a contrasting perspective to the workshop's focus on Asia. She talked about the international governance of agriculture and suggested taking the opinion of civil society into account. Further, she pointed out that according to her experience, alternative forms of agriculture do not necessarily have to be „green.“

The general discussion that followed centered on several issues and questions. DOMINIC GLOVER (Wageningen University) connected the perceptions of global/mainstream/industrial agriculture to the question of how small-scale farmers could continue to be agriculturalists when many agents or actors see the disappearance of small-scale farming as a good sign of development and suggested a reassessment of our society's views about development and „romantic“ rurality. GLENN STONE (Washington University) put forth the issue of the role of media in the presentation of new

ideas and called for better communication channels between researchers and media in order to improve knowledge sharing. He further considered the role of markets and incentives in promoting alternative agriculture. Taking up this theme, Müller reminded the audience that those markets are always reciprocally embedded in society and politics.

The second workshop day continued with talks by GRAEME MACRAE (Massey University) and DANIEL MÜNSTER (Heidelberg University). In his video speech from New Zealand, Macrae addressed „Agrarian Future and Crisis“. He rejected certain discussions in the aftermath of the Green Revolution which supposed that „Hybrid Agriculture“ only came up with the Green Revolution. Since agricultural methods have always influenced each other, agriculture has never been „pure“, argued Macrae. Referring to his research in the Indian State of Uttarakhand, a landscape of „less crisis“, he concluded with his observation of two big developments in alternative agriculture; the first is „going backward“ to traditional agriculture and the second is „going forward“ to standardized organic agriculture.

These trends were also among those presented by Münster who had found a wide range of alternatives in farming experiments after the neoliberal crisis in Southern India. His presentation displayed the agronomic pluralism that emerged after the crisis of prices and the crisis in productivity led to a wave of suicides amongst farmers from Wayanad, Kerala. The peasants responded by coming up with a range of alternatives including shifts in crops, adoption of new methods and knowledge extension. One popular alternative in Wayanad is Zero Budget Natural Farming, which opposes cost-intensive techniques and brings spiritual principles and permaculture methods together. Many farmers in the area concerned also shifted to cultivating spices like pepper, vanilla or ginger, commonly known as cash crops. The discussants agreed that cash cropping is an alternative in times of crisis, but that it is not necessarily a socially or ecologically sustainable one.

The Panel on „Organic Agriculture in the Himalayas“ included presentations by JU-

LIA POERTING (Heidelberg University) and SHAILA SESHIA GALVIN (Williams College). When talking about regional organic trends, both researchers included thoughts about „alternative markets“ relating to these alternative farming practices. As Poerting's research on Certified Organic Agriculture in Pakistan showed, most certified organic products are exported to markets of the global north and are therefore an integral part of the global agro-food system. Even if organic farmers experience an upsurge of attention on local markets in urban areas like Lahore, the majority of the population cannot afford the expensive labelled products.

Galvin's case study on „Making Markets“ for Organic Agriculture in Uttarakhand was another example for the economic-ecologic connection. In this particular Himalayan region, the local Organic Commodity Board aims at bringing markets to the rural mountain regions by linking salesmen from the city with rural small-scale farmers. The distance between farmers in the valleys and the end-consumers in the cities was seen as obstructive to establishing local markets. Political agents try to create markets by „cultivating urban tastes“. Shaping consumer demand is thus the first step in changing rural agricultural practices in Uttarakhand. A discussion followed on how organic agriculture often connects small farmers from the Global South with consumers from the Global North. Whether organic agriculture can be labelled „alternative“ if it does not provide an alternative market for local consumers remained an unanswered question during the discussion.

The last panel on „Agrarian Paradigm Shifts“ featured talks by RAJESWARI RAINA (NISTADS-CSIR), DOMINIC GLOVER (Wageningen University) and a closing discussion. Giving insights into her work in Delhi, Raina depicted the political influence on the success or failure of some agricultural initiatives. She focused on the marginalization of rainfed agriculture in India within governmental policies and development agendas. Thereby, Raina considered the lack of an adequate support system especially for „traditional“ farming practices as common in India. Concluding upon her analysis of policy and science discourses, she urged researchers

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to take political economy along with political and juridical frameworks more into account.

In the last workshop paper, Glover examined the already mentioned SRI from a historic perspective. What Glover called „a powerful story“ was the rediscovery of this ancient crop management system which has been supposed to be a more productive and ecologically sustainable alternative for rice cultivation. Despite difficulties in adopting the complex changes for cultivating with SRI, Glover insisted on its benefits, especially for poor and marginal farmers. He critically discussed its framing as a rediscovered alternative by giving examples of SRI farming throughout the 20th century. At the same time, his analysis of the system's origins highlighted disagreements on scientific questions and the appropriate role and strategy of agricultural researchers. The positive portrayal of SRI provoked controversy among the attending researchers and led to a discussion over the lacking popularity of SRI and its apparent long history of implementation in different countries. Glover argued that Green Revolution discourses did not leave room for farmers to experiment beyond trialing hybrid seeds. Thus, entangled in discussions on donor driven research, SRI remains a highly contested story of rediscovering a historic alternative.

The „Final Discussion“ drew on the words of anthropologist Paul Richards: „Farming operations are embedded in a social context“.<sup>1</sup> Richards almost seemed to be present in the discussion that centered on the term „agriculture as performance“, which he had coined in the 1980s. Participants' closing comments came back to a question in Stone's keynote on „what audience do farmers perform for?“ It was concluded that agricultural research, including the projects of most workshop participants, has by and large ignored such performance as a field for systematic inquiry.

To summarize, the workshop covered a broad range of topics. Due to the interdisciplinary and trans-regional backgrounds of the participants, the themes not only hinted at possible issues for further research, but also broadened the perspective on the research questions involved. Through emphasis on „indigenous“ knowledge produc-

tion and the conscious agency of farmers in peripheral regions, the workshop highlighted the importance of locality as a space that negotiates the new influences by actively adapting, translating and also resisting them and emphasized the mutual dependency of actors even in unbalanced power relations, as well as the resulting circulation and co-production of knowledge. The participating researchers were mainly concerned with small-scale projects which often were restricted to local conditions. One critique that arose in the discussion is therefore the applicability of research results to a broader area. Hence, the workshop showed that further research on a larger scale is needed. This could include the shifting of the focus to a wider geographical context as well as to larger scale industrial agriculture. Furthermore, the specific local and national, political, social and juridical contexts always need to play a central role in further research. Closing two days of intensive discussions, it became clear that precisely such workshops and networks provide food for thought that might shape the world of tomorrow – with additional cooperative research and practical application of the findings.

## **Conference Overview:**

### *Keynote Lecture*

Glenn Davis Stone (Washington University): Power, Experiment and Knowledge in Indian Agriculture: Creation, Sustenance and Destruction

### *Session One: Political Economy, Science and Knowledge*

Daniel Münster (University of Heidelberg ): Welcome address and introduction to workshop

Barbara Harriss-White (University of Oxford): Expert Knowledge and Situated Knowledge: A Multi-criteria Mapping of Trade-offs in Technology Options in Rice Production in India's Semi-arid Tropics

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Richards, Agriculture as a performance, in: Robert Chambers et al. (eds.), *Farmer First: Farmer Innovation and Agricultural Research*, London 1989, pp. 39-42, here: p. 40.

*Session Two: Agrarian Innovation and Rural Uncertainty*

Andrew Flachs (Washington University): Trial Runs in Uncertain Times: Skilling among Organic and Bt Cotton Farmers in Telangana, India

Shambu C. Prasad (Xavier Institute of Management): Transformations in Agriculture: Understanding Agency and Innovation in SRI in India

*Session Three: Heritage Alternatives*

Sunita Rao (Vanastree Seed Saving Collective): Ancient Roots, Contemporary Shoots: Forest Home Gardens in the Agroecological Landscape of Western Ghats

Saeed Haldule (Heidelberg University): Development in Context: Food Security, Indigenous Seed

Networks and the Marginal Agrarian Social Lattice in Maharashtra

*Session Four: Comparative Perspectives on Alternative Agricultures*

Peter Vandergeest (York University): The Many Social Lives of Organic Agriculture and Food in Asia

Rajeswari S. Raina (NISTADS-CSIR), Christian Strümpell (Heidelberg University) and Birgit Müller (Paris): Final Discussion (Day One)

*Session Five: Agrarian Future and Crisis*

Graeme MacRae (Massey University): Back to the Future: What Can We Learn from Agrarian Landscapes of Less Crisis?

Daniel Münster (Heidelberg University): Agronomic Pluralism in South India: Farming Experiments after the Neoliberal Crisis in Kerala

*Session Six: Organic Agriculture in the Himalayas*

Julia Poerting (Heidelberg University): Knowledge of Organic Agriculture in Pakistan: Challenging the Agro-Scientific Discourse

Shaila Seshia Galvin (Williams College): Making Markets, Reordering Landscapes: Organic Agriculture in the Uttarakhand Himalaya

*Session Seven: Agrarian Paradigm Shifts*

Rajeswari S. Raina (NISTADS-CSIR): Rainfed Agriculture: The Discourse and Evidence for a Paradigm Shift

Dominic Glover (Wageningen University): The System of Rice Intensification: A Rediscovered Agrarian Alternative

*Final Discussion:*

Peter Vandergeest (York University) and Glenn Davis Stone (Washington University)

Tagungsbericht *Cultivating Futures: Ethnographies of Alternative Agricultures in (South) Asian Landscapes of Crisis*. 13.12.2013–14.12.2013, Heidelberg, in: H-Soz-Kult 14.07.2014.