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Cover: India, Gujarat, made for the eastern Indonesian market (Toraja) Maa’ ceremonial cloth with design of trees (detail), possibly 17th century Cotton (plain weave), hand-painted mordant-dyed and resist-dyed Collection of Banoo and Jeevak Parpia. Photo credit: David O. Brown, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art

Inside Front Cover: Father Door and Children Doors, photo by Nipun Prabhakar
From the Director
Iftikhar Dadi

The South Asia Program had a busy year in 2018-2019. We offered a rich ensemble of lectures and panel discussions (p. 20), sponsored conferences (p. 11-13, 15), and hosted a diverse group of scholars and artists (p. 36). We continued our support for faculty teaching and research, and the promotion of language study (p. 35). And we maintained our co-sponsorship of cultural and educational programming by the many South Asia focused student groups on campus.

Our outreach efforts to K-12 (p. 26), as well as community college, and teacher education communities have recently been enhanced by the addition of Kathi Colen Peck at the Einaudi Center (p. 22, 29). The South Asian Studies Fellowship, now in its third year, continues to attract emerging artists, writers, and scholars from across South Asia, who spend 8 to 12 weeks in Ithaca to engage more deeply with their work in the university environment (p. 14, 22).

Cornell’s engagement with South Asia continues to deepen across colleges and departments. CALS has a new agreement to collaborate on climate-smart agriculture in Tamil Nadu (p. 29), and the Cornell India Law Center was recently established (p. 31). This is in addition to the expanded work by the Tata-Cornell Institute for Agriculture and Nutrition (TCI) (p. 6-7, 34), and the Nilgiris Field Learning Center (NFLC) (p. 10). However, our longstanding focus on Nepal and Himalayan Studies remains in a transitional state, due to recent faculty retirements.

Notable speakers included the critically acclaimed actor and director Nandita Das, who presented Manto, her most recently directed film. In a long and engaging discussion after the screening with a large audience of students, faculty and members of the Ithaca community, Das explained the motivations that led her to conceive and direct this labor of love (p. 17). The short story writer Saadat Hasan Manto (1912-1955) was a prolific author, who wrote about socially marginal characters from all religious groups with humor and sympathy, and also worked in Bombay cinema during the 1940s. It is, however, his unsparing accounts laced with black humor of the Partition of India and its aftermath, which forced him to leave Bombay for Lahore, that constitute some of the most profound artistic responses to the trauma of the Partition on everyday lives. For Das, Manto’s unsparing truth-telling makes him a persona who is needed more than ever, in our era increasingly saturated with insular media narratives.

The Harvard historian Sunil Amrith is among the foremost scholars in the emerging field of environmental history (p. 16). His talk on the Indian Ocean in a longer historical register, “Monsoon Asia,” not only revealed new relationships between people and climate in the past, but served as a reminder that the challenge of climate change that we are facing today remains one whose scale is far larger than the framework in which nation-states currently operate. Similarly, the magnificent Traded Treasure: Indian Textile for Global Markets exhibition at the Herbert F Johnson Museum of Art showcased how South Asia has been deeply embedded in global circuits of trade across centuries (p. 18-19, front and back cover). The technological and aesthetic sophistication of these fabrics in addressing the nuances of each market they engaged with is indeed remarkable. Acclaimed novelist Neel Mukherjee’s brilliant presentation in September 2018 marked a milestone, being the 10th speaker in our annual Tagore Lecture Series (p. 16).

We look forward to the presentation by the equally accomplished Anuradha Roy on September 20, 2019 (p. 21).

The South Asia Program is ably served by Manager Daniel Bass, who also moonlights on WRFI every other Tuesday evening to present South Asian music to Ithaca listeners (p. 25), and our new Administrative Assistant Gloria Lemus-Chavez (p. 29). I thank the SAP Steering Committee and the external Advisory Council for their guidance. Finally, we look forward to working closely with Rachel Beatty Riedl, the new Director of the Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies, to continue to develop the South Asia Program in the coming years.
Saturday April 20, 2019, was a big day at the Nilgiris Field Learning Center (NFLC). Our “batch” of thirteen students, five Cornell undergraduates and eight from local Irula, Kurumba, and Toda communities, were going to present their research projects carried out across the Nilgiris biosphere. The gathered crowd at the Keystone Foundation campus in Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu included children, teenagers, and elders; families, friends, and curious neighbors; Keystone staff and well-wishers; local journalists and almost every member of the villages and small town neighborhoods where the students had been working in mixed groups over the previous two months.

This year the MC, Jeyanthi, was a NFLC alum from the first batch, in 2015, who now works at Radio Kotagiri, and another three alumni showed up, including Kieran Micka-Maloy, from the third batch, in 2017, who was spending a year in Rajasthan as Clinton Global Fellow, all curious to see what the latest batch was up to. The community presentation is as much about showcasing student work as it is about spreading awareness of the NFLC, disseminating results, raising new issues for the community, and building support for the program. It also creates a space for community members, especially women, to ask questions and to voice their opinions.

For the Cornell students, the NFLC is a “Study Abroad” experience, with a crucial twist: the program is bilingual, in Tamil and English, and the students work with young people from the very communities among whom they are conducting research on a variety of issues linked to sustainability. They learn across deep differences, set by discipline, culture, language, and lived experience. For the local Nilgiris students, this is a rare opportunity to get away from everyday work and labor to study, to think about the challenges their communities face, and to consider what they may be able to do about it. It is not like any school or college with which they are familiar, and presents an opportunity for them to imagine themselves and their life journey differently.

The presentations in Tamil are a careful mix of images, maps, and the spoken word. This year there were five projects: one group worked with Irula farmers dependent on agriculture-based livelihoods in the Hasanur region to understand the challenges they faced, while another student group engaged with Kurumba healers to learn about traditional healing practices. A third group sought to understand threshold moments in the lives of Irula women, while the fourth focused on conservation, documenting and studying wild edible plants associated with the Todas. Finally, the fifth group sought to better understand the water-and waste-scapes of three neighboring communities—Kotas, Badagas and Tamils—on the outskirts of Kotagiri. As the gathered crowd heard the students, laughed at their observations, and occasionally marveled at what the students thought was important, people interrupted with questions and pondered aloud on issues that often go unnoticed during everyday conversations.

In the five years that NFLC students have made community presentations, we have borne witness to the pride with which everyone gathered looks on as their children, our students present the work that they have done with their Cornell partners. Our Keystone colleagues note how much more receptive some groups have become to the interventions that follow NFLC research projects. For them, the future of the NFLC is tied to what the program can continue to offer the communities and young people they work within Kotagiri and in Ithaca.

But on that warm April day, under a clear blue sky, what we did was celebrate: our student pairs as they walked us through their work and posed, certificates in hand, for endless photographs; our NFLC students, alumni, and Keystone staff who stood next to each other and served lunch to the gathering; and the generosity of the communities who allowed us into their homes. Another cycle in our small and vibrant NFLC program had come to a close.