

Editorial In the relationship between science and politics, in large parts of Europe, the former seems to have found a special niche, further and further away from its role as critical examiner of politics and power. To my mind a new scientific approach towards politics is urgently called for. Stating it simply, this lamentable development requires science – ranging from technical studies such as physics to social sciences, from urban studies, anthropology, and cultural or art history to classical literature or archaeology – to accept its responsibility towards society in the public sphere (political as well as cultural). Science's vital role in the political field is best determined as a means of informing the public and policy makers, while offering vociferous critique when it is called for.

By the time these words are published, we may well have been presented with yet another depreciation of the words 'compelling evidence', to be followed by a decrease of stock market prices. Current international affairs not only underline the responsibility of science towards society and thus politics, they even challenge the concept of 'evidence', the scientific concept *par excellence*. The existence of (outside) threats, whether valid or not, should push the scientific community to involve itself more in public discussion, surely not less. Current warmongering aside, the increased importance of Asia in the international field as well as the rapid and continuous increase of international relations in general, amongst which Asian-European connections feature prominently, make it more important than ever to be informed about Asia's past and present, its cultures, politics, economics, and societies. The necessity lies in closing the gap between international researchers, between researchers and students, and between academia and society, of which it is a vital part. In celebration of its tenth anniversary, the IIAS will hold a festival on 16–17 May this year, with which it hopes to interest prospective students in Asian Studies. In the long run the IIAS hopes to work towards increasing a general interest in Asia and perhaps close some of the above-mentioned gaps. Meanwhile, and regardless of what thirty signifies for many, reaching the thirtieth issue has done nothing to displace the newsletter from our open attitude towards new and uncharted topics of research. As the IIAS aims to operate at the interface of technical studies, life sciences, and social sciences, we hope that this issue's theme on 'Psychiatry in Asia', guest edited by Waltraud Ernst, will constitute a promising step towards such an approach. As always we warmly welcome your comments and suggestions.

Enjoy reading. < Maurice Sistermans

Director's note >

Director's Note on ASEM

Since its inception in 1996 the Asia-Europe Meeting has made real progress. The main components of ASEM, which has thus far been organized on an informal basis, are economic cooperation, political dialogue, and education and culture (the so-called three pillars). Certain progress can be said to have been made in all three of these domains, in particular in the economic domain (on trade and investment issues) and in the cultural field, in which the Asia-Europe Foundation is very active. The political pillar, however, has delivered fewer results. The parties involved consider the ASEM process as a way to deepen relations between Asia and Europe and as such it is a time-consuming, sensitive exercise in building mutual confidence. Progress on second domain themes, such as good governance, human rights, sustainable environment, and the rule of law, can only be made on the basis of trust still today. Yet, there are undeniable signs indicating an increasing readiness, on both sides, to discuss these topics, thus I believe the investment in time to have been worthwhile.

By Wim Stokhof

The slowly growing process of rapprochement between Asia and Europe is, however, being endangered by recent developments. As we all know, the current fifteen EU member states have invited ten countries from Central and Eastern Europe to join the union. This EU enlargement will undoubtedly have far-reaching consequences for the ASEM process. It can be expected that these countries will, in due time, express their interest in participating in the Asia-Europe dialogue.

On several occasions and informally, the ASEAN members of ASEM have on their part indicated to expect that several new members, namely Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar/Burma, will eventually be given the green light to become ASEM members. Most likely, newly independent East Timor will soon also aspire to ASEAN and, consequently, ASEM membership. A deci-

sion will probably be taken at the sixth ASEM summit in Hanoi. Meanwhile, given the additional EC proposal to enlarge ASEM by accepting India, Australia, and New Zealand, we may wonder in all seriousness what kind of organization the EC and its partners have in mind.

Of course, such a proliferation of members will confront this relatively young configuration of countries with all sorts of practical problems. In fact, I fear that the often praised interactivity and informality of the ASEM process will eventually prove an obstacle to a clear and focused exchange of ideas.

Yet even much more crucial, to my mind, is the fact that the ASEM is still in need of a long-term internally driven strategic vision, which can be translated into clear and concrete objectives, and relevant effective instruments – such as a professional secretariat – to reach those objectives. As ASEM threatens to be overwhelmed by its all-



too reactive responses to external circumstances even in its present set up, the enlargement of ASEM seems to be pointless, if such a strategic vision is lacking. <

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Letter to the Editor

Forum >
General

It was interesting to read Shalini Sharma's report regarding 'The Life of Hindus in Britain' published in the *IIAS Newsletter* (IIASN 27, p. 23). Apart from its higher philosophies, there is not much interest in the West for Hinduism (cf. Buddhism). The important part of the article was the fact

that finally some kind of concern is raised for Britain's Hindu minority community – in a country where many different ethnicities or religious groups live. Seeking to identify long under-represented peoples through research, building temples, and more such things are indeed positive steps. Inter-

estingly though, Sharma does not mention the large numbers of Nepalese living in Britain. Her report gave the impression that she was emphasizing Hinduism more than the Hindu minority in Britain. If this is so, I am afraid the title does not fit the context. I would like to ask whether a simple interview research on Hindus (or any other minority group for that matter) can bring positive input to people's lives? Or is it just that studying minorities has become today an academic buzzword that has attracted research on Hindus? I believe for actual change there should be a grassroots awareness campaign that can influence the policy makers. Just building a gathering place or writing an academic report that no one sees, except those involved in the research, will not make a difference. Even though the existence of the class system is officially denied, it is clear that in practice British society is still divided into various social ladders. In this light, I find it highly remarkable that 'Westerners' view the 'caste system' in South Asia so negatively while class arrangements and discrimination often based on race are prevalent in their own society. I think the article would have been much more insightful if it had illustrated what the position of Hindus in British society is and showed whether the current research is aimed at finding a 'social space' for minorities rather than just a place for academic talk or community prayer. <

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Reply from the Author

I welcome Mr Giri's response to my research report on 'The Life of Hindus in Britain' (IIASN 27, p.23) for a dual reason. Firstly the initial motive behind writing the report – to introduce the research to interested individuals and consequently encourage the generation of more contacts – could be better facilitated. Mr Giri is correct; I am yet to interview Nepalese Hindus. In this regard I hope he will be willing to introduce me to individuals he thinks should be interviewed. More generally, his reaction presents me with an opportunity to clarify aspects of the research that have perhaps been misunderstood.

The agenda of the research is not to 'bring positive input into people's lives' or to 'simply end up as another unread academic report' (Mr Giri's inferences). Neither is 'actual change for the Hindu community' a driving force behind this work. Such policy-driven agendas make too many assumptions about the existence of a homogeneous Hindu community and a distinct identity of interests amongst such a group.

The research is merely a first step in recording the life stories of first generation migrants who call themselves Hindu. The archive that will hold the interviews could be a database from which research, whether journalistic or academic, can spring. The archive will also be taken back into various community groups in order to teach the significance and practical application of oral history. The theoretical basis of oral history, of capturing the voices of 'ordinary' men and women as opposed to political or cultural 'representatives' is itself an attempt to counter charges of academicism. It is also an attempt to engage with the voices and thoughts of individuals about their faith and their notions of community rather than assuming their consciousness from their class, caste or social positions. While the agency of individuals is philosophically questionable, at least a few aging voices will be recorded and preserved for posterity; voices that quietly challenge sweeping generalizations.

So far, the interviews conducted indicate that there is no such thing as British Hinduism as an all-encompassing aegis. Rather, what is apparent is a very strong and vibrant, numerically dominant Gujarati community which generates much of the temple building and community activity in specific areas of Britain such as Leicester and Neasden. However, smaller centres of concentration constituting more recently immigrated groups such as the Sri Lankan Tamils have also developed in the inner cities. Each group, be it Bengali, West Indian or Swami Narayan, brings with it different practices of worship and religious spaces.

Organizations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Hindu Swyamsevak Sangh, and the more innocuous Council of Hindu Temples, have been attempting to draw the various Hindu communities together, but members of each organization complain of the disunity and diversity amongst practitioners of the religion. Thus the research extends our knowledge of the lack of homogeneity amongst Hindus in Britain but also draws out what Hinduism means for each disparate believer. The focal question is: What do these people mean when they call themselves Hindu? This is perhaps far more basic than the points raised by Mr Giri, and yet the responses so far have contributed to a more complicated and nuanced understanding of the practice of faith, and the richness of 'ordinary' life. <

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Editors' note >

The original article can be found on
www.iias.nl/iiasn/27/23_IIASNewsletter27.pdf

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