

Second Notre Dame South Asia Conference
“Democracy, Rights & Development in South Asia”
May 16 – 17, 2023

The second edition of the Notre Dame South Asia Conference was successfully organized on May 16-17, 2023, at the Keough School’s office in Washington, DC. Conference funding was provided by Notre Dame’s Kellogg Institute for International Studies, Liu Institute for Asia and Asian Studies, Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts, Pulte Institute for Global Development and the Keough School for Global Affairs.

The conference featured five academic talks on day 1, covering a range of issues related to democracy, rights and development in South Asia. The featured papers discussed issues related to political representation, citizen activism, political institutions and the functioning of local governments. Each talk was followed by a robust discussion among seminar attendees, and provided ample food for thought and feedback for the authors. Day 2 featured two policy oriented panel discussions, attended by more than 50 people physically and on Zoom. The first panel discussed the role of unelected officials in strengthening democracy, rights and development in South Asia, while the second panel focused on the linkages between disease, democracy and development.

Due to Covid and other personal factors, we experienced a large number of changes in panel members and conference discussants at the last minute. Despite these hurdles, the conference generated many interesting insights and an opportunity to meet a wide variety of scholars and policy makers interested in South Asia. Below we provide very short summaries of the main topics discussed in the conference. A full conference program with names and affiliations of presenters and discussants is available at the end of this document.

Susan Ostermann and Gilles Verniers examined the underrepresentation of women candidates for higher office positions in Haryana, India, focusing on the intersection between political ambition, caste, and gender. Based on a survey of 1100 villages across 22 districts, they found that women leaders are often selected on elitist criteria and their participation is used as a means to extend their families’ influence. Yet, women expressed more interest in politics than men, and more so among lower-caste respondents.

Lakshmi Iyer explored the effect of electoral accountability on local government expenditures, putting together a new database of rural district board expenditures for 200 districts over four decades during the British colonial period when the role of local elected officials was gradually expanded. Preliminary results from Punjab and United Provinces indicated that greater elected representation on local councils was associated with higher spending on education and less on roads and civil works.

Adam Auerbach reported on the findings from 1142 local councillors across 60 small towns in India, and found that almost all of them desired more training on procedural matters such as learning the extent of their revenue and spending powers, budget processes, meeting procedures, spending rules and creating work orders. His work points to the widespread lack of such procedural knowledge as a key impediment to good governance.

Mahan Mirza discussed the anatomy of recent regime change in Pakistan, with a focus on the removal of Prime Minister Imran Khan in 2022. The role of domestic interest groups (including the military) as well as geopolitical factors was discussed.

Jeff Witsoe conducted detailed field work in the rural areas of Bihar state in India. He found that in many places, laborers are not fully aware of their rights under the government's flagship workfare program. He highlighted a possible tradeoff between electoral politics and non-electoral political participation, including class-based economic activism.

The panel discussion on the role of unelected officials started off with Madhav Joshi's findings from his research on Nepal's civil war. He finds that the state's legitimate use of violence to suppress rebel movements can paradoxically reduce its legitimacy in other ways. Karuna Nundy, an eminent lawyer from India, highlighted the role of colonial doctrines and societal norms in restricting the "liberty of the human body," particularly for women. Amit Ahuja highlighted the reduction of corruption in some sectors of public provision in India, but its continuance in other sectors. Panel attendees raised many interesting questions including the role of armed groups in settings beyond Nepal, and how to understand and resolve the tensions between democracy and minority rights.

The second panel on "Disease, democracy and development" began with Santosh Kumar describing his field work on anemia prevention in rural India. He found that simply providing information to parents about better nutrition has no impact, while providing iron-fortified meals in schools is highly effective. Perna Singh discussed her ongoing book project on the role of the state in controlling contagious disease and highlighted the role of a moral relationship between the people and the state. Jishnu Das contrasted bottom-up approaches to health improvement with more "big government" approaches and concluded that private provision of public goods may not be enough to ensure long-term health improvements.

Conference Program

Day 1: May 16, 2023

8.15: Continental Breakfast

9.00-10.15 Susan L. Ostermann (Notre Dame) and Gilles Verniers (Amherst College)
"Why Do Women Run for Office? Exploring the Meanings Behind Women's Village-Level Political Engagement in India"

10.15-10.30 Coffee

10.30-11.45 Mahan Mirza (Notre Dame)
"Anatomy of Regime Change in Pakistan"
Discussant: Susan Ostermann, Notre Dame

11.45-1.00 Lakshmi Iyer (Notre Dame)

“Electoral Accountability and Local Government Spending in Colonial South Asia”

Discussant: Irfan Nooruddin, Georgetown University

1.00-2.30 Lunch

2.30-3.45 Adam Auerbach (American University)

“Who Knows How to Govern? Procedural Knowledge in India’s Small Town Councils”

Discussant: Rahul Oka, Notre Dame

3.45-4.00 Coffee

4.00-5.15 Jeff Witsoe (Union College)

“Rights Activism, Electoral Politics & Welfare Entitlements in Rural Bihar”

Discussant: Amit Ahuja, University of California – Santa Barbara

7.00 Dinner – Rasika (West End)

Day 2 (May 17)

8.15 Continental breakfast

9.00-10.15 Panel 1: The Role of Unelected Officials in Democracy, Rights and Development

Amit Ahuja, University of California – Santa Barbara

Madhav Joshi, Notre Dame

Karuna Nundy, Supreme Court Advocate - India

10.15-10.45 Coffee

10.45-12.00 Panel 2: Disease, Democracy and Development

Santosh Kumar, Notre Dame

Perna Singh, Brown University

Jishnu Das, Georgetown University

12.00-1.00 Lunch