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Michael Boyden  
Harvard University  
Department of English and American  
Literature and Language  
Barker Center  
12 Quincy Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
USA

e-mail: [michael.boyden@iasa-rias.org](mailto:michael.boyden@iasa-rias.org)

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## AMERICAN STUDIES IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT (NEPAL, BANGLADESH, AND INDIA)

**Manju Jaidka**

Punjab University

When we speak of 'American Studies', what exactly do we mean? This question came to my mind when I participated as Resource Person at an American Studies Institute held at Dartmouth where, under the rubric of 'American Studies' a variety of topics was dealt with, ranging from nineteenth-century Whitman studies to current topics like Abu Ghraib, from media and popular culture to interpersonal relationships among ethnic minorities, from academic experiments to racial eccentricities. Clearly, for the American audience attending the workshop, American Studies was anything and everything that dealt with the myriad hues of America.

Elsewhere in the world, however, the notion of 'American Studies' is somewhat different. In the Indian subcontinent, where I am located, while the basic premises remain the same, there is a more or less fixed component allocated to the discipline which involves the study of American history, political relations, literature, culture, and of late, multi-ethnic studies. American Studies was initiated in the mid-twentieth century, courtesy US government agencies, as a gesture of peace and goodwill. Most American Studies programs still operate through this conduit. American Studies here comprises an American component in the syllabus, some conferences, seminars, workshops or lectures on related subjects. The approach is fairly predictable in this part of the world.

The call for contributions on hemispheric studies for *RIAS* provided an opportunity for making a comparative study of American Studies in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. With this in view, I contacted colleagues in neighboring countries, asking for their opinions and inputs on the subject. While I received immediate responses from Bangladesh and Nepal, I did not succeed in making any contact with scholars in Pakistan. Apparently, not all scholars are computer savvy and not all institutions of higher education have updated websites that could facilitate the survey.

It was easy getting in touch with scholars from Bangladesh and Nepal as we, in India, have had some interaction with them over the past few years, but with Pakistan there has been no exchange. Moreover, relations between India and Pakistan

keep fluctuating. Whenever there is an outbreak of violence in India there is a lot of tension between the two countries. Academics, for the most part, like to stay clear of controversies. As a consequence, there is little contact between institutions of learning in the two countries. Further, both countries seem to vie for Uncle Sam's attention—and this is another cause of strained relations between them.

Whatever the reason, the effort to establish contact with scholars in Pakistan was not successful. However, through the United States Educational Foundation in India I now have some contact addresses which will, hopefully, enable me to carry out my exploration of American Studies in Pakistan. I also hope to make similar contact with academics in Sri Lanka.

## NEPAL

In the Universities of Nepal the English Departments introduced American literature in the mid-1980's as an optional paper. Most 'Americanists' are from American Literature but some scholars from International Relations are also into 'American Studies'. However, the discipline is not very popular, with barely 5% of the post-graduate students pursuing it. Invariably, it is the job market that determines the students' choice of subjects. Tribhuvan University tried for two years to run a full-fledged program in American Studies but the effort was not successful. There are few takers for American Studies because there aren't sufficient job prospects. Students generally prefer British Literature and Linguistics because these fields enable them to get jobs when they complete their masters.

No conferences are held in the field of AS but US agencies send scholars to the USA every year on funded fellowships. Scholars in Nepal are of the opinion that if more funding were made available for holding annual conferences, for bringing out journals and to send out more scholars for research in the US, interest in American Studies would increase considerably.

## BANGLADESH

Turning to Bangladesh, a conversation with experts in the country reveals that the scenario is slightly better. American Studies was introduced in Bangladesh when a few scholars based in Dhaka—inspired by the American Studies Research Centre in Hyderabad—approached the US Information Service in 1987 to encourage the academic study of America in Bangladesh.

However, in Bangladesh, too, few scholars are attracted to American Studies. No university in Bangladesh offers it as a separate subject although the University of Dhaka had approved a Department of American Studies sometime in the 1990's. There is an 'American' component in diverse disciplines like Literature and the social sciences, but no 'specialization' in American Studies.

In 1987 the Bangladesh Association of American Studies (BAAS) was formed in Dhaka. Later, in the 1990's—two more associations, one based in Rajshahi University and another in Chittagong—were formed mainly because BAAS Dhaka was unable to reach out to people outside the capital interested in doing Amer-



ican Studies.<sup>1</sup> BAAS Dhaka (regularly) and BAAS Chittagong and Rajshahi (occasionally) arrange conferences and workshops on American studies for their own members and for college teachers of the country. BAAS Dhaka has brought out a journal which, though irregular, has produced nine issues. BAAS Dhaka works closely with the American Center in organizing almost all its events. The American Center funds seminars and workshops from time to time.

## INDIA

In India, American Studies began with a fanfare in the 1950's and 60's. It came in the aftermath of the Cold War, promoting mutual exchange of goodwill across the globe. The initiative was taken by the US State Department through newly formed bodies like the Fulbright Commission, the American Center and the United States Foundation in India (USEFI). The discipline received tremendous encouragement and very soon academic institutions in India were teeming with 'Americanists'.

However, as they say, money makes the mare go. The saying could not be truer in the case of American Studies in India. By the last decade of the twentieth century, when the US funding sources dried up and the State Department pulled out, there was no money to support activities in the discipline any longer. The leading American Studies library in the country struggled for survival until it finally closed and scholars turned to other, better funded, areas. Today, some activity in the field of AS continues in the form of Conferences and Seminars but not all events are of the desired world-class standard.

A pertinent question that arises is—what is the use or relevance of AS in India today? Why do we need to study it if it does not relate to our local conditions? Faced with this question of relevance, a group of serious academics sought to bridge the gap between AS and the Indian scenario on the one hand, and AS and the global context on the other. Doing so, MELUS–India was launched as the India Chapter of MELUS, the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, which had been operating in the US for a couple of decades. The idea was to undertake comparative studies of multi-ethnic literatures of the US *vis-à-vis* Indian literary traditions. MELUS–India as a movement was successful and the association grew bigger, meeting annually over conferences that brought in scholars from other parts of the world.

Then, last year, the question of relevance again came up—why not relate AS to the global context? With this in view, the members of MELUS–India floated a parallel organization called MELOW for the study of World literatures. The same set of scholars/academics is thus engaged in both American Literature and World Lit-

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<sup>1</sup> This formation of separate Associations is interesting. As we are aware, Bangladesh is a small country and distances between places/universities are not so great when compared with distances in India or the US. However, it is evident that in Bangladesh American Studies is conducted in isolated groups and not collectively on a big scale. The same has happened in the southern states of India where scholars got together to form a South Indian Association of American Studies, distinct from the Indian Association for American Studies. There has also been talk of setting up a South-Asian Association for American Studies, but apparently it has not taken off or we would have gotten more news about its activities.

eratures. The aim is to cross borders, expand horizons, and form an international network of scholars engaged in the study of literary traditions across the globe.

This is the scenario in the field of Literature, which, incidentally, is my field. In other departments—for instance, Art, History, or the Social Sciences—there has also been a shift away from AS. While Postcolonial Studies and International Relations have been center-stage for the last decade and more, AS gets pushed further into the background.

The present American Studies scenario in India is not as bright as it used to be fifteen years ago. However, the state of affairs can change if US government policy changes, if priorities change, if instead of continuing on a war-mongering path, the US decides to promote educational and cultural exchanges all over again. Academics in India look forward to such a turn of events!