



**Gita Dharampal-Frick, Rachel Dwyer, Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach, Jahnavi Phalkey.** *Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015. 344 S. \$70.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-945275-0.



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**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (May, 2016)

## **G. Dharamal-Frick u.a. (Hrsg.): Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies**

The book represents the concerted effort of four editors to give a concise introduction into major terms and categories of academic disciplines related to the study of the South Asian subcontinent. The volume mirrors a broader trend in cultural studies and social sciences that aims to produce concise overviews on the current field of research. Similar to other examples, among them *The Key Concepts* series of SAGE Publications that is dedicated to a variety of disciplines like education, ethnography and sociology, the present manual addresses current debates on methodology and terminology in Modern Indian Studies. Envisaged as a *pioneering venture* [p. x] at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and Heidelberg University, the volume's editorial board brings together a wide field of expertise comprising the political, socio-cultural and intellectual history of modern South Asia as well as the fields of science and technology, cultural studies and Indian cinema. Similarly to *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, another collective endeavour coming more from a Commonwealth perspective, the present volume sets out to offer an *easy-to-access reference volume* [p. ix] for students, scholars and the wider inter-

ested public. This is a demanding task since such concise companions often risk preconceiving *Modern India* as a clear-cut site of academic inquiry and debate, which also tends to be misunderstood as and equated with the Indian nation state. However, the present lexicon balances the reality of divisions of area studies in universities worldwide on the one hand with the necessity to equip students and researchers with an initiatory guidebook to a *diverse and complex range of this multidisciplinary field* on the other [p. x].

The compendium comprises a common introduction by the four editors, followed by 107 entries addressing a variety of concepts and terms such as *Ahimsa, Khalistan, Mughlai, Nehruvian, Seven Sisters* and *Zenana*. Choosing an alphabetical listing of the key concepts instead of framing them in thematically arranged clusters enhances its functionality and practical usefulness as a work of reference. The volume concludes with a concise bibliography. An index, however, is missing though it would have strengthened the compendium's functional appeal as another level to access its contents. Since the volume aims at a wider readership, maps would have similarly

been useful for locating the entries' manifold geographical references.

The introduction highlights core aspects of interest such as 'political, economic and religious issues', the 'struggle for Independence', and 'understanding the subcontinent's dynamic diversity' [p. xiii]. The editors furthermore critically discuss the challenges that they faced while preparing an interdisciplinary compilation of differently calibrated contributions from specialists of numerous fields. Here, a crucial point is the problematisation of an inevitably 'ideational' [p. xii] approach, which cannot represent the reality of South Asian linguistic and cultural diversity. Thereby, the editors voice self-reflective academic concerns, which also hint at promising future points of research on conceptual issues in South Asian scholarship.

According to the editors, the list of concepts offers a kaleidoscope of 'new, creative, and thought-provoking debates' [ix]. Indeed, the entries cover a wide range of terms which are essential for the study of the political and economic as well as social and cultural history of the subcontinent. The editors' assemblage thereby reflects the complexities of past and current scholarship on South Asia. At the same time, they are aware of inevitable shortcomings in their selection and encourage readers to give suggestions for expansion in further editions. Still, some of the choices regarding the volume's entries lead to omissions, which are pitfalls all too familiar to students of South Asian studies. Thus, the term 'Itihasa' was chosen instead of 'History or Historical Writing', because it could 'viably capture the cognitive implications and empirical specificities of the respective Indian conception and phenomenon' [p. xii]. This decision, however, neglects for example the substantial Persian historiographical traditions of South Asia that are usually signified with the term *Tārīkh*, which, however, does not feature in the entry. A particular positive aspect concerns the attention that is paid to broader views on historical continuity and change. With regard to South Asia, this long-term perspective transcends colonial and

postcolonial frames of 'Modern India' and thereby includes historical pathways which have to be traced back to the subcontinent's premodern period. This approach is fruitfully elaborated, for instance, in the entries *Bazaar* and *Malabar*.

Similarly noteworthy is the textual structure of the entries. Though they differ in terms of length, all adhere to a similar framework and style which creates consistency on the one hand and accommodates room for each scholar's individual expertise on the other. The fact that the volume assembles a huge community of scholars from across the entire globe bears witness to the fact that the editors took their enterprise seriously. The entries, each written by a specialist in the field, are structured in a concise and clear manner. A short definition at the outset provides an explanation and etymology of each term. This is then further elaborated in each entry according to one of two general approaches in correlation with the author's special field of research: the first mode takes a diachronic stance to discuss the 'historical trajectory' [p. xi] of a term and situates the concept in current academic debates. The second approach pays attention to a term's historicity by focusing on a synchronic perspective that accentuates different facets of a concept, for example, in public and academic discourses. A succinct list for further reading at the end of each entry provides an efficient and effective starting point for a deeper immersion into a specific subject.

The few minor critical points aside, 'Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies' offers a diverse and refreshing look at recent scholarship in the field. As an introductory apparatus, the compendium provides a scholarly substantial and nevertheless practical gateway to the complex debates of modern South Asia and its manifold areas of academic inquiry. Hence, the volume serves as a useful guide for students and scholars of South Asian studies as much as for academics who are working in a variety of related fields across the humanities and social sciences.

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**Citation:** Christopher Bahl. Review of Dharampal-Frick, Gita; Dwyer, Rachel; Kirloskar-Steinbach, Monika; Phalkey, Jahnvi, *Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. May, 2016.

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