

Petra Heidrich's research work in the context of the development of South Asian Studies at the ZMO (1992-2000)

Hafner, Annemarie

Konferenzbeitrag / conference paper

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hafner, A. (2010). *Petra Heidrich's research work in the context of the development of South Asian Studies at the ZMO (1992-2000)*. (ZMO Working Papers, 1). Berlin: Zentrum Moderner Orient. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-329579>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Deposit-Lizenz (Keine Weiterverbreitung - keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Gewährt wird ein nicht exklusives, nicht übertragbares, persönliches und beschränktes Recht auf Nutzung dieses Dokuments. Dieses Dokument ist ausschließlich für den persönlichen, nicht-kommerziellen Gebrauch bestimmt. Auf sämtlichen Kopien dieses Dokuments müssen alle Urheberrechtshinweise und sonstigen Hinweise auf gesetzlichen Schutz beibehalten werden. Sie dürfen dieses Dokument nicht in irgendeiner Weise abändern, noch dürfen Sie dieses Dokument für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, aufführen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Mit der Verwendung dieses Dokuments erkennen Sie die Nutzungsbedingungen an.

Terms of use:

This document is made available under Deposit Licence (No Redistribution - no modifications). We grant a non-exclusive, non-transferable, individual and limited right to using this document. This document is solely intended for your personal, non-commercial use. All of the copies of this documents must retain all copyright information and other information regarding legal protection. You are not allowed to alter this document in any way, to copy it for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the document in public, to perform, distribute or otherwise use the document in public.

By using this particular document, you accept the above-stated conditions of use.

Petra Heidrich's research work in the context of the development of South Asian Studies at the ZMO (1992–2000)

Annemarie Hafner

The paper was presented at the colloquium *Indian Agrarian and Peasant History – a Challenge to Current Research* organized by the *Gesellschaft zur Förderung des ZMO* on September 23, 2010 in honour of Petra Heidrich's 70th birthday

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to remember Petra Heidrich, a friend and colleague of Annemarie Hafner, who died much too soon. Special attention is given to Petra Heidrich's scientific work, which can be subsumed under the theme of »Agrarian and Peasant Studies and Transformation of Traditional Social Structures and Reform Movements in the 19th and 20th Centuries in India«. At the same time, the paper seeks to honour the contribution Petra Heidrich made to the prosperity of the ZMO during its founding stages and initial positioning. Starting from these memories, Annemarie Hafner tries to develop conceptual suggestions on how, from today's viewpoint, the research field of agrarian and peasant studies can be revived, as they currently lie fallow in the landscape of German social historical research, and in particular, within South Asian Studies.

The way to modern South Asian Studies

In 1992, Petra Heidrich took up temporary employment at the Forschungsschwerpunkt Moderner Orient, the precursor of the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO). She had submitted a project titled »Leaders and peasants in discourse. India in the second half of the 20th century« and was allowed to continue with a new orientation the research work on Indian agrarian and peasant history that she had carried out at the Academy of Sciences of the G.D.R., which was dissolved by the 1990 treaty of unification.

By that time, Petra Heidrich had already for about 20 years successfully looked into various questi-

ons of Indian agrarian history and peasant studies. She already could provide a remarkable list of publications, which played a decisive role in Dietmar Rothermund's support for her appointment at the Forschungsschwerpunkt Moderner Orient. In 2006, his words commemorating Petra Heidrich, recalled that time as follows:

I first encountered Petra Heidrich in quasi-bureaucratic procedures that had to do with the Academy of Sciences of the G.D.R. That was in the period of reunification and the Academy was to be dissolved because it didn't fit into the research landscape of the Federal Republic. Now, among the staff of this academy were outstanding scholars whose further work had to be secured. One late evening Mr. Ende, Mr. Steppat, and I met with Mr. Simon, at that time President of the Research Council, in the Max Planck Institute for European Legal History in Frankfurt to confer on what could be done for those members of the Academy's staff who conducted research work on countries of the Orient. What emerged was the precursor institution of today's ZMO. The Academy of Sciences had an especially good team that dealt with modern India. In the old Federal Republic, classical Indology prevailed and, apart from the few scholars at the Heidelberg South Asia Institute who focused on modern India, no one was cultivating this field. So the colleagues from the Academy of Sciences were extremely welcome. Among them, Petra Heidrich, too, offered a lot in terms of research, as could immediately be seen from her list of

publications. Even before the Indian »Subaltern Studies« group made itself known, Petra Heidrich had worked and published on Indian peasant movements. In later years she continued to make many contributions in this area.¹

Petra Heidrich won her colleagues' respect with her modest, calm, and sober demeanor. She was engaged and open. In her recollections, Ellinor Schöne described her as follows:

Petra didn't make a big fuss about herself. She was totally in her element when advocating her opinions and convictions – emphatically and with great persistence. She wasn't reticent about dissenting, especially when she felt discussions lacked depth or when her sense for justice came into play. That's how I experienced her in groups of specialists as well as during our shared time on the staff council. – Professionally and privately, she was sincerely compassionate. Arbitrariness and indifference were alien to her.²

The influences that shaped Petra Heidrich's character came primarily from her family. Her paternal grandfather was an archetypal Social Democrat of the early labour movement: a modest man, but proud of his profession and his artisan skills. At the same time he was always striving for education and, with a well-developed interest in literature and art, he gave his grandchildren important food for thought. By means of his stories, for example, about his experiences as a roving journeyman, he conveyed insights into the usually precarious living conditions of ordinary people. He and his wife did their utmost in their condition to enable their only son, the later Professor Heinrich Scheel, to get the best possible education. He later became a leading scholar in German research on the Jacobins and for many years the Vice President of the Academy of Sciences of the G.D.R. He visited the School Farm Scharfenberg at Tegel Lake, whose reform-pedagogical approach fostered his many-sided gifts in the years from 1929 to 1934. There he also found a circle of friends that became involved in anti-fascist resistance after the National Socialists seized power. In contact with the circle around Schulze-Boysen from the beginning of the war, Heinrich Scheel was arrested in Berlin in September 1942, together with the Berlin resistance group of the Rote Kapelle. Sentenced to five years of imprisonment, he served his sentence in the Aschendorf Moor Camp, until in mid-July 1944

¹ http://www.zmo.de/personen/Ehemalige/Heidrich/Obituary_Nachruf.htm

² See Fn. 1.

when he was put on probation in Wehrmacht punishment units.

Petra Heidrich's father in particular was the leading figure of her childhood and youth. His unshakeable anti-fascist viewpoint and his Marxist, materialist worldview were essential aspects of her orientation. On their basis she developed an intellectual attitude that kept the interests, values, and dignity of people in mind and that was based on the principle of social justice. She resolutely lived out this way of thinking. Her interest in people, in various characters, social milieus, and everyday lifestyles were crucial for her decision to study Indology and, as a minor, several semesters of Ethnography.

She studied from 1959 to 1965 at the Institute for Indian Studies at Berlin's Humboldt University. That was during the time when Walter Ruben still held the Chair for Indology. In accordance with his ideas of Indian Studies as a »multidisciplinary combination of the widest range of scientific disciplines«, the boundaries of traditional Indology were to be overcome; until then, Indology was characterized by a primarily philological or linguistic orientation based on Sanskrit or Middle Indian texts of ancient India.³ His idea was to expand a scientific interest in India to make it into a complex regional study involving all branches of knowledge in the past and in the present. To him, determining India's place in world history and its contribution to world culture was the central task of Indological research. Walter Ruben's striving to investigate an »all-around history of India« that would include »the development of ancient and new India, that of its basis and superstructure, its material and ideational culture«⁴ shaped a whole generation of Indologists of the G.D.R. in the years between 1950 and 1965. He strongly approved of Petra Heidrich's proposal to carry out her diploma thesis. It was on the village development program that India launched in 1952, which, administered in a decentralized and community-centered manner, aimed to increase agricultural productivity and to improve the educational and health situation. He did so because he thought that modern India could not be understood without considering the agrarian question.

Petra Heidrich's first treatise already clearly displayed features that would characterize her later research proficiency. Conspicuous were her pronounced analytical mind and her ability to convey complex aspects of India's culture and society.

³ Cf. Hiltrud Rüstau, »Von der Indologie zur Südasienswissenschaft: Die Entwicklung der Indienstudien an der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (1950-1990)«. In: Joachim Heidrich (ed.), *DDR – Indien: Partner auf Zeit. Erfahrungen und Einsichten*. Hamburg: LIT Verlag 1998, 145-146.

⁴ Walter Ruben, »Über die Aufgaben der Indienwissenschaft«. In: *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Gesellschafts- und Sprachwissenschaftliche Reihe XXV* (1976) 3, 303.

Her works were always based on rich and precisely researched source material that she collected with effort and diligence from Indian and British archives, especially in her later years. To this were added her vibrant intellectual curiosity and her ability to develop her own trains of thought and to shape them creatively in her work. At the same time, her approach was characterized by a humanitarian position that never permitted her to forget the rights and needs of socially and politically disadvantaged groups of people.

From 1965 to 1973, Petra Heidrich worked as a Research Assistant at the Institute for Oriental Studies at the Academy of Sciences of the G.D.R. Here she pursued studies on programs of Indian village development in the 1920s and 1930s. Her first publications were on these topics.⁵

From 1973 to 1981 she lived with her family in India. Joachim Heidrich, her husband, had for a while taken a position with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and worked initially as Consul General in Calcutta and later served in various positions at the embassy of the G.D.R. in New Delhi. This relatively long stay in India was conducive to Petra Heidrich's intellectual development in two ways. First, she was able to intensively observe the country's economic and political processes from close up and for a fairly extended length of time. From 1973 to 1975, she was registered as a »bona fide research scholar« at the Department of History of Rabindra Bharati University in Calcutta. Professor Sunil Sen, whom we, the older generation of Indian social scientists, knew well and esteemed for his achievements, gladly took the role of a mentor and fostered Petra Heidrich's interest in the history of Indian agrarian and peasant history.

From 1975 to 1981, the Heidrich family lived in New Delhi. During this time, Petra Heidrich was employed as an external staff member with documentation works for the Central Institute of History at the Academy of Sciences of the G.D.R. In her free time, she could pursue her research interests. For example, she enjoyed reading in the Nehru Memorial Library. And she familiarized herself with the holdings of the National Archives and the Archives of Contemporary History at Jawaharlal Nehru University. She also visited a great number of governmental and non-governmental institutions or organizations as well as political parties that were involved in one way or another with and published relevant material on issues of India's ag-

5 »Gandhismus und Dorferwicklung«. In: Gandhi und der Gandhismus in der Gegenwart. In: *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* 16(1970)3, 409–416, »Die Agrarfrage und landwirtschaftliche Entwicklungsprojekte im kolonialen Indien der zwanziger und dreißiger Jahre«. In: Horst Krüger (ed.), *Neue Indienkunde – New Indology. Festschrift Walter Ruben zum 70. Geburtstag*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1970, 211–226.

rarian economy or the situation and organization of peasants and agricultural workers. In this way, she developed an impressive base of sources for her Ph.D. thesis, which, after returning to Berlin, she wrote in a relatively short time and defended with great success. Ravi Ahuja will go into detail about this thesis, or on its revised and expanded version, which the Akademie-Verlag Berlin published in 1988 under the title »Agricultural Labour in Indian Society«.⁶

30 years of research activity

Since the beginning of the 1970s, a small research group working on the history of modern India had established itself at the Central Institute of History at the Academy of Sciences of the G.D.R. After their return from India, Petra and Joachim Heidrich joined this group. Up to the late 1980s, the research activities of these Indologists focused essentially on the political and social history of India in the period of British colonial rule and during the liberation movement of the 19th and 20th centuries. At the center of attention were processes connected with the character, course, and results of the national liberation movement.

The historical research, that Petra Heidrich carried out between 1981 and 1991, first at the Institute of History and then at the Institute of General History at the Academy of Sciences of the G.D.R. had two thematic emphases. One was peasant studies and the other was questions of caste and caste movements in colonial and independent India; but the two were interrelated.

A broader scholarly interest in developing countries in the G.D.R. during the 1970s and 1980s was to understand the economic and social problems of young nation states, including India, that had fairly recently cast off the fetters of colonial rule and in which peasants made up a major segment of the population and for production as well as a force of political power. In this framework, based on the results of India's changing agrarian structure under colonial conditions and the character of agrarian reforms in independent India, questions inevitably arose about how various segments of the peasantry and the rural proletariat took part in the national liberation movement and about their potential for further social changes. After all, it was this era of struggle for national independence in which a relatively new type of peasant movements had developed.

In 1998 a balanced review of South Asian Studies in the G.D.R. noted that the projects concerned with analyzing society and in particular with the formation of classes, which referred in detail to the peasantry, the industrial proletariat or the bourgeoisie

6 *Agricultural Labour in Indian Society*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1988.

of India were engaged in an innovative social-historical research. There were hardly any comparable studies of this kind in the German-speaking world.⁷ Of course, this observation was not applicable to the British and American and especially not to the Indian scene of social science, in which themes of economic underdevelopment, class formation, the causes of peasants' revolts, etc. had long been critically discussed. And here we find the stimuli that Petra Heidrich took up and developed further in her works in an original way. Thus, in the 1980s, she had a number of publications that dealt with the role of peasants in India's national liberation movement, with the relationship between the Indian National Congress and the peasantry, with the social differentiation within the rural population, and with its revolutionary potential in independent India.⁸ The socio-economic characteristics and the level of consciousness of India's rural proletariat thereby came within the focus of her investigations.⁹

In the course of her research work on India's agrarian and peasant history, Petra Heidrich developed a clear idea of the massive role that caste continued to play in the society of this country. So in connection with her research on peasant movements, she took up the problematic of caste. She was especially interested in exploring the significance of caste in the formation of networks and co-

alitions that gained political influence.¹⁰ She thus wrote essays in which, for example, she addressed B. R. Ambedkar's struggle for civil rights, commented on caste in the area of tension between secularism and communalism and analyzed the non-Brahmin movement.

At the beginning of the 1990s, under the influence of »cultural studies« which was clearly gaining prestige on an international level, Petra Heidrich worked out a new perspective on her peasant studies. She now placed the actors themselves at the center of her investigations and asked above all about their identities and ways of life in the conflict between tradition and modernity. She thereby concentrated on the political positions and ideological views of peasant leaders. For example, she compared two prominent but opposite types of peasant leaders, namely N. G. Ranga and Swami Sahajanand Saraswati. With this research approach, she contributed to the consolidation and positioning of the newly founded Zentrum Modern Orient, especially in the years between 1995 and 2000.¹¹

7 Kerrin Gräfin Schwerin, »Die Südasienwissenschaften in der DDR – Eine Bilanz«. In: Wolf-Hagen Krauth/Ralf Wolz (ed.), *Wissenschaft und Wiedervereinigung. Asien- und Afrikanwissenschaften im Umbruch*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1998, 333.

8 See also: »Die revolutionären Potenzen der Bauernschaft im unabhängigen Indien«. In: Annemarie Hafner/Joachim Heidrich/Petra Heidrich/Horst Krüger, *Studien zum Kampf um den sozialen Fortschritt in Indien*, Berlin: VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften 1975, 157-219; »Die wissenschaftliche Forschung zur Rolle der Bauernschaft in der nationalen Befreiungsbewegung«. In: *asien, afrika, lateinamerika*, vol. 12, no. 6, 1984, 1001-1012; »The Indian National Congress and the Peasants. A strained alliance in the struggle for national liberation«. In: Günter Barthel/Lothar Rathmann/Martin Robbe (ed.), *Asian and North African Studies in the German Democratic Republic – Traditions, Positions and Findings*. In: *asia, africa, latin america*, special issue 18, 123-131, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1986; »Der indische Bauer im nationalen Befreiungskampf – Kanalisierter sozialer Protest«. In: Martin Robbe (ed.), *Wege zur Unabhängigkeit. Die antikoloniale Revolution in Asien und Afrika und die Zukunft der Entwicklungsländer*, 146-159, Berlin: VEB Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften 1989.

9 See also: »Die soziale und politische Bewusstseinsbildung des indischen Landproletariats bis zur Gründung des Allindischen Landarbeiterverbandes 1968«. In: *Jahrbuch für Geschichte*, vol. 33, 163-201, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin 1986; »Indien: Sozialökonomische Merkmale und Bewusstseinsentwicklung des Landproletariats«. In: Annemarie Hafner/Jürgen Herzog (ed.), *Sklave – Kuli – Lohnarbeiter. Formierung und Kampf der Arbeiterklasse in Kolonien und national befreiten Ländern. Ein historischer Abriss*, 256-300, Berlin: Dietz Verlag 1988.

10 See also: »Caste in India and B. R. Ambedkar's Crusade for Civil Rights«. In: Joachim Heidrich (ed.), *The French Revolution of 1789. Its Impact on Latin America, Asia, and Africa*. In: *asia, africa latin america*, special issue 25, 91-101, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag 1989; »Die Kaste im Spannungsfeld von Säkularismus und Kommunalismus: Bürgerrechte als Gegenstand von Kastenkonflikten im heutigen Indien«. In: Dietrich Reetz (ed.), *Die »Reorientalisierung« des Orients? Zur Rolle der Tradition in Gesellschaftskonflikten der achtziger Jahre*. In: *asien, afrika, lateinamerika*, special issue 4, 97-121, Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1991; »Kastenbewegungen und Wertewandel. Die Nichtbrahmanenbewegung und die Ansprüche der »Anderen Rückständigen Kasten««. In: Annemarie Hafner/Joachim Heidrich/Petra Heidrich, *Indien: Identität, Konflikt, soziale Bewegung in einer pluralen Gesellschaft* (= Arbeitshefte des Forschungsschwerpunkts Moderner Orient, No. 1), 53-82, Berlin: Verlag Das Arabische Buch 1993.

11 »N. G. Ranga und Swami Sahajanand Saraswati – Bauernführer zwischen Tradition und Moderne«. In: Joachim Heidrich (ed.), *Changing Identities. The transformation of Asian and African societies under colonialism*. Papers of a symposium held at the ZMO, Berlin, 21-22 October 1993 (= Studien des Forschungsschwerpunkts Moderner Orient, No. 1), 289-306, Berlin: Verlag Das Arabische Buch 1994; »Ochre Robe and Tricolour. Samnyasis and Sadhus in Social Movements in the First Half of 20th Century«. In: Annemarie Hafner (ed.), *Essays on South Asian Society, Culture and Politics* (= Arbeitshefte des Forschungsschwerpunkts Moderner Orient, No. 8), 57-72, Berlin: Verlag Das Arabische Buch 1995; »Die vergleichende biographische Studie als Fenster auf den gesellschaftlichen Wandel. Zwei Bauernführer im spätkolonialen Indien«. In: Dietrich Reetz/Heike Liebau (ed.), *Globale Prozesse und »Akteure des Wandels«. Quellen und Methoden ihrer Untersuchung* (= Arbeitshefte des Zentrums Moderner Orient, No. 14), 61-76, Berlin: Verlag Das Arabische Buch 1997; »The Indian Village as Perceived by Peasant Leaders in Late Colonial India«. In: Bernt Glatzer (ed.), *Essays on South Asian Society, Culture and Politics II* (= Arbeitshefte des Zentrums Moderner Orient, No. 9), 71-82, Berlin: Verlag Das Arabische Buch 1998; »Tradition auf dem Prüfstand. Bauernführer im spätkoloni-

Petra Heidrich's shaping and meaningful influence proved to be especially important for the success of the work of the group project »Actors of Change. Conflict and Synthesis of Oriental and Occidental Cultures in Life Careers and Group Images«, which the German Research Foundation supported between 1996 and 2000. In eight case studies from a historical perspective, this project focused on persons and groups in selected regions of Asia and Africa that became mediators between occidental and oriental cultures against the background of global upheavals, fundamental processes of social change and historical turning points in the period between the 18th and the first half of the 20th centuries.¹² She herself took part in this project with a study on »Tradition and social emancipation. Peasant leaders in late-colonial India«. In the discussions among the circle of colleagues that accompanied the project work, she tirelessly called for clearer elaboration of those aspects in the individual contributions that made it possible to compare the diversely configured individual projects. The colleagues who contributed to that project certainly will agree, that it is due substantially to Petra Heidrich that the project did not remain a mere collection of unrelated case studies, but a common theoretical approach ultimately prevailed, the project gained more substantial consistency, and a linking thread became visible in the final result.

This group project was embedded in an interdisciplinary research program of the ZMO conducted between 1996 and 2000 to analyze perceptions and results of global processes and discourses in Asia and Africa from the 18th to the 20th centuries. The primary research achievements were to be produced in individual case studies. The international conference on »Dissociation and Appropriation of Global Processes and Ideas: History, Religion and Local Culture in Asia and Africa«, held between October 23-25, 1997 at the ZMO, was extremely important for bringing these research results together, especially because several basic positions in the globalization debate emerged in the course of the concluding discussion. From the beginning, Petra Heidrich took an avid part in the debates on projecting the ZMO's overall program and in the colloquium series, which served to evaluate interim results. Finally, she and her colleagues Katja

alen Indien«. In: Henner Fürtig (ed.), *Abgrenzung und Aneignung in der Globalisierung: Asien, Afrika und Europa seit dem 18. Jahrhundert*. Ein Arbeitsbericht (= Arbeitshefte des Zentrums Moderner Orient, No. 19), 85-93, Berlin: Verlag Das Arabische Buch 2001; »Peasant Intellectuals and Peasant Populism in India«. In: Joachim Heidrich/Hiltrud Rüstau/Diethelm Weidemann (ed.), *Indian Culture: Continuity and Discontinuity. In Memoriam of Walter Ruben (1899-1982)*, 129-146, Berlin: trafo verlag 2002.

¹² Petra Heidrich/Heike Liebau (ed.), *Akteure des Wandels. Lebensläufe und Gruppenbilder an Schnittstellen von Kulturen*. Berlin: Das Arabische Buch 2001.

Füllberg-Stolberg and Ellinor Schöne published the conference material.¹³

The recollections of some friends and colleagues that the ZMO has posted on its website reveal Petra Heidrich's personality and dedication to common interests. Thus, Achim von Oppen wrote in 2006:

I got to know Petra Heidrich in January 1993, when I was engaged as the first ›Wessi‹ (i. e. West German) at the Forschungsschwerpunkt Moderner Orient. One seemed to feel that the fairly recent breakup of the G.D.R., the so-called ›turnaround‹, had left some scars on Petra. But I soon experienced Petra as a person who resolutely opened herself to the new circumstances and sought to continue to pursue, in a thoroughly changed context and in a new way, what she had positively identified with since her youth. – In her later years, Petra was close to me especially because of her liveliness. She loved criticism and intellectual dispute. I still see her flashing eyes challenging others to disagree when she noticed that she couldn't understand this or that term or idea at all – for example, when we once again laboriously tried to find a necessarily rather ›global‹ common denominator for our research work at the ZMO. Of course, this also reflected a serious interest, namely in not sweeping the contradictions and power relations of ›globalization‹, especially from the viewpoint of the ›South‹, under the rug. With this interest, she provided important impetus to our critical reflection in the 1990s, which were from our point of view initially characterized by a certain euphoria over globalization. At the same time, she contributed to bringing the various eastern and western German strands of debate on the North-South conflict into what I believe a fertile exchange among us.¹⁴

Petra Heidrich's research activity ended abruptly in the year 2000 when a new research project was not approved. Achim von Oppen recalls this situation and the consequent end of their collegial collaboration with the following words:

Petra was a decidedly persistent, sometimes also wilful research worker. That in 2000, shortly before reaching her 60th year of life, a last application for funding was rejected was very bitter for her (and for us). And yet she emphasized above all her empathy with the rejections

¹³ Katja Füllberg-Stolberg/Petra Heidrich/Ellinor Schöne (eds.), *Dissociation and Appropriation: Responses to Globalization in Asia and Africa*. Berlin: Verlag Das Arabische Buch 1999.

¹⁴ See Fn. 1.

of project proposals from younger colleagues who still had their professional development in front of them.¹⁵

The refusal of her last research project indeed disappointed Petra Heidrich and cut to the quick, even if this decision provided a breathing space of two or three years to travel with her husband and, not least, explore Berlin. And so the two of them went fairly regularly on journeys of discovery in the city she had lived in for decades – until her serious illness made these excursions impossible.

The peasant in contemporary South Asian Studies

At this point we ask ourselves how Petra Heidrich's research work is relevant today for work on issues of agrarian change and peasants' activities in India and whether it provides an impetus for reviving this kind of research. We must first note quite soberly that this specific way in which she carried out her studies on agrarian and peasant questions does not exist at all anymore in Germany and hardly on the international level or even in India itself. In the past years, scholars have repeatedly noted that investigations on agrarian and peasants issues have mostly disappeared from the research programs of the relevant academic institutions,¹⁶ and not only in Germany, but also generally in the English-speaking world, including India. As an example of this, I would like to quote the statement that Utsa Patnaik made in an interview she gave to the Indian political magazine »Frontline« in 2004. T.K. Rajalakshmi, a journalist, asked: »Agrarian studies seem to have disappeared from the radar screens of social scientists at a time when rural India has gone through a churn in the last decade. What explains this?« Utsa Patnaik answered:

Very true. This is partly to do with the whole market orientation of research. When I started my academic career in the early 1970s, agrarian studies in India had a very important role to play and there were any number of students interested in it. But one of the problems with this neo-liberal paradigm has been to divert the attention of research from this vital area. Even the interest in other productive sectors of the economy like the small-scale sector or the manufacturing sector has got diluted. The emphasis is much more on the financial and the service sectors rather than the real sectors of the eco-

nomy. But in more recent years, precisely owing to the impact of the neo-liberal policies as well as the WTO [World Trade Organisation] discipline added to these policies and the impact on agriculture, there is a revival of interest. Students who have gone into international economics now come back and say, »Oh I see, so agriculture is an important subject.« There are people who are again going into this area, but approaching it from the other end – not from internal class relations but from the international economy back to their own economy.¹⁷

What are the reasons for this situation? It surely has something to do with the fact that the era of the national liberation movement and the type of peasant movements specific to it are a thing of the past and hardly relevant anymore for the present. At that time, the task was to overcome the colonial legacy. So research was conducted on the redistribution of land ownership in the course of reforms and an attempt was made to determine the degree to which the rural population took part in political movements and how and by what forces it was motivated to pursue political interests.

But the problem of agricultural development in the countries of Asia and Africa, including India, remains significant, even if views about the agrarian question have fundamentally changed. In any case, due to the coincidence of various crises – the financial crisis, the food crisis, and the energy and environmental crisis – it is drawing enhanced attention again. The past four decades of neoliberal globalization have brought obvious changes in the field of agriculture. Among them are corresponding patterns of ownership, the appropriation and distribution of income from agriculture and wage labour, etc. Decisive land reform measures of earlier years, for example limitations on land ownership, are being revoked to permit the agglomeration of greater agricultural areas in the hands of large-scale investors.

Even if fewer people earn their livelihood in agriculture than did forty years ago, they still add up to millions, whose situation ought to interest social historians, especially since it is still urgent to address the themes of hunger and poverty.

Some experts speak of neocolonialism: using dubious methods with inestimable social and ecological consequences, rich nations secure for themselves farmland in poor countries, and transnational concerns contribute to the ruin of peasant economies through their practices of selling credit-dependent farmers agricultural packages comprising genetically manipulated seeds, fertilizers,

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ For example, Saturnino M. Borrás Jr., »Agrarian change and peasant studies: changes, continuities and challenges – an introduction«. In: *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36:1, 5–31.

¹⁷ Utsa Patnaik, »Die Wirtschaftsreformen – Wurzeln der Krise«. In: Dies., *Unbequeme Wahrheiten. Hunger und Armut in Indien*, Draupadi Verlag, Heidelberg 2009, 98.

and pesticides. But local economic agents in the form of vast industrial enterprises and public infrastructure projects, for example large dam constructions, also drive farmers away from their ancestral land with no compensation worth mentioning and without concerning themselves with the farmers' later livelihood. The peasants and agricultural labourers affected by this have responded to these attacks in various ways, either with quiet suffering, or by being driven to suicide, or with open resistance. New forms of peasant movements have arisen and led to new networks and coalitions that struggle to gain political influence. Added to this are entirely new phenomena connected with the effects of climate change on agriculture and the rural population. Today, journalists from mass media often provide information on these problems while social scientists behave rather callously.

The issues mentioned here should, however, be raised to a methodological, i.e., scholarly level and be taken up by South Asian scholars in particular. But the prerequisite for this appears to be **new critical theoretical perspectives**. And these are lacking at the moment.

If our remembrance of Petra Heidrich's dedication to the area of Indian agrarian and peasant studies has at least opened our eyes and led us to think about these questions, then a first step would already be taken.

Annemarie Hafner was Research Fellow at ZMO between 1996 and 2000 and co-organiser of the memorial colloquium on Petra Heidrich.

The **ZMO Working Papers** is a series of publications that document and reflect developments and discussions within ZMO research projects. Texts are usually empirically based and regionally focused and may also represent outcomes of research at an early stage. They are published on the ZMO website.

The **Zentrum Moderner Orient** (ZMO) is the only German research institute devoted to an interdisciplinary and comparative study of the Middle East, Africa, South, Southeast and Central Asia from a historical perspective. Current research focuses on the interaction between predominantly Muslim societies and their relations with non-Muslim neighbours. ZMO was founded in 1996 as one of six university-independent, non-profit research centres for research in the humanities.

ISSN 2191-3897

© ZMO 2010

Design: Jörg Rückmann, Berlin

This text may be downloaded only for personal research purposes. Additional reproduction for other purposes, whether in hard copies or electronically, requires the consent of the author(s), editor(s). If cited or quoted, reference should be made to full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title of the programmatic text, the year and the publisher. For questions and comments please contact ZMO.