



Dr. Gajendran Ayyathurai  
Research Fellow  
Centre for Modern Indian Studies  
Göttingen University  
Germany  
Tel. +49 551 39-19625  
Fax +49 551 39-14215  
[gajendran.ayyathurai@cemis.uni-goettingen.de](mailto:gajendran.ayyathurai@cemis.uni-goettingen.de)

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I was awarded a PhD in Anthropology from Columbia University, New York, in 2011 for my study of Tamil Buddhism in modern India. My research themes focus on Tamils, particularly those who were ostracized and categorized as untouchables, and their literary and social movements. Over the years through such studies I have found that the oppressed Tamils rejected not only pejorative categories of caste, such as Pariah / Paraiyan / Depressed Classes / Weaker sections, but also claimed such people to be descendants of Tamil Buddhists of ancient times, whose forms of community were neither based on nor organized by caste; but had been historically casteless. The single largest source for my research has been the corpus of radical literary and historical writings written by Pandit C. Iyothee Thass (1845-1914) and serialized in the volumes of his journal, *The Tamilan* ("Tamilian"), published from 1907-1914. His works represent a sustained engagement with the Tamil literary canon, revealing traces of a Buddhist past through a rereading of epics in poetry and other literary genres that have come to be considered central to Indian history and culture. Indeed, the Tamil Buddhist movement, which was led by the most peripheralized in society laid the foundation upon which the anticaste discourses and politics for which Tamil Nadu is justly famous was built. For all these reasons, I argue that without the Tamil Buddhist movement the seeds for the later nonbrahmin movement and Dravidian politics could not have been sown in the Tamil speaking regions.

Given my research projects, it is only natural that I came to know about SARII through my American academic friends who work on anthropological and historical aspects of India such as caste and gender problems. Three things about SARII impressed me which, I think, have global relevance:

First, having taught at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, and Columbia University, New York, I know how challenging it is to put together a conference by connecting academics from across the world. To my pleasant surprise SARII organizes annual conferences in collaboration with Southern Methodist University (SMU), Dallas, since 2006. I have only heard of ongoing annual lectures at various universities endowed in honor of somebody. But I have not come across an annual conference on South Asia which brings together renowned academics from North America, Europe, and Asia who are given the floor to express their thoughts in a no-holds-barred manner. After having participated in the 2016 SARII conference entitled "The Legacy of Buddhism in South Asia: Disruption, Propagation, and Accommodation," I felt that SARII is consistently accomplishing each year what many universities are not in a position to do. I also realized this is because of the

intellectual training, vision, and commitment that the SARII board members have taken upon themselves to generate an impact not only in the US but also in South Asia.

Second, my impression about SARII is all the more positive after I got to know the common grounds that the organizers (i.e., SARII board members and SMU academics) shared in selecting intellectually rigorous and, at the same time, socially significant themes which are usually overlooked in academic institutions that are known for South Asian Studies. Most remarkably SARII has been at the forefront of tackling a white elephant in South Asia: the problem of caste/casteism. Needless to say, the theme of caste has usually been placed on the back burner in almost all Western academic venues about which I have a close understanding for two decades now. A very knee-jerk conclusion could be that because almost all the South Asian academics in the Global North are from a privileged class they are not in a position to take on caste/casteism as much as they are proficient in race/racism related themes—many are also known to avail various opportunities in the Western academy’s “diversity” programs as “colored” people. But more careful understanding would reveal that South Asian Studies is not able to break free from structural and functional legitimization of caste as a cultural, social, political, economic, and historical phenomenon. And so, questioning caste as a deep rooted political malady is not possible in eastern and western academic institutions yet. Likewise the scope to sideline the privileged-caste-views of South Asia, which Western academic institutions have been promoting since 1750’s through Indological or Sanskrit studies by overlooking the vernacular in South Asia, has not emerged. It is here that I notice how SARII has been at the forefront in engaging with caste in South Asia. That is, how there are various religious, regional, and vernacular communities in the Indian subcontinent which have embraced a sense and history of castelessness, which should be taken seriously intellectually. And that one could see anticaste aspects cherished by Indians not just in modern times but for long.

Third, SARII board members, such as Dr. Sudalaimuthu Palaniappan, have consistently contributed to interdisciplinary scholarship by diligently insisting on alternative sources and points of view of South Asians whose voices have been silenced due to various limitations of eastern and western academies. I am thrilled to see they have completed groundbreaking studies in epigraphy studies, vernacular literary and historical studies, cultural studies, and so on. These achievements are currently impacting the way we understand vernacular regions of South Asia. Interestingly, the SARII board members and audience also come from various walks of life who are very interested in diverse new themes in the humanities and social sciences of South Asia. Their intellectual seriousness and cultural standpoints have furthered the goals of SARII as a unique inclusive institution that taps into the diverse energies of Asians, Americans, and Europeans, which is rare in North America. Through its global network of scholars, SARII has the potential to establish various research, publishing, and training programs in South Asia. Considering that many academic institutions in India, such as JNU, New Delhi, are falling apart, and that enormous disparities exist in academic and institutional priorities across South Asia, it is all the more important that SARII fill this vacuum and facilitate local and global intellectual exchanges, which is desperately needed among diverse religious, regional, and vernacular communities.

I fully support SARII’s growth as a crucial South Asian Institution.

Sincerely,  
Gajendran Ayyathurai