This workshop brings together scholars working on different periods, diverse themes and with different kinds of sources. It was envisaged as a space where historians could reflect on the fettered narratives that challenged their work and which they had to dismantle as they hatched and expanded their ideas. What questions, sources and methodologies did they find enabling? What chronologies did they create for their work, what histories did they resist and which inspired new questions? Although these are well researched subjects, hard grained fissures caused by academic training restrain scholars from crossing historical divides or, indeed, self-reflexively discuss their limited chronologies and readings. This is a moment when we would like to hear scholars talk to the academy about its traditions, how they worked with them and not. Through our discussion we would like to gather possible pathways to rethinking our histories and the possibilities that these hold for imaginings of our societies and our politics.

DATES: 2-3 March  
Time: 10:00 am to 5:00 pm  
VENUE: Room #6, Satyakam Building (Social Science Building Annex)

Welcome and Introduction to Workshop: 10:00 am – 10:30 am  
Sunil Kumar, Coordinator CAS Programme, History Department

PANEL 1: Historical Time and Historical Boundaries
Chair: Aparna Balachandran

10:30 – 11:00 am
Imperial Motifs and Historical Time Zones: A New Capital for the British Indian Empire
Amar Farooqui  
CAS, Department of History  
University of Delhi

Abstract: On the eve of the First World War two major projects for building capital cities were launched in the British empire. One of these, Pretoria, was for a newly constituted colonial entity within the empire, the Union of South Africa. The other was the project for a new imperial capital for India, New Delhi. Both were consciously planned for making ideological statements about power and order. The centrepiece of the plan for New Delhi was the abode of the governor-general, the ‘viceregal palace’. I would like to reflect on the historical experience of building grand edifices to house governors-general in India, and the manner in which this experience contributed to the conceptualization of the viceregal residence in New Delhi. Almost a century before the project for constructing a spectacular viceregal
palace in New Delhi was conceived, a relatively more modest but equally spectacular building for its time, came up in Calcutta to house the governors-general of the British Indian empire. This was Government House, Calcutta.

By looking at some of the ways in which those appointed to design these buildings assembled ingredients thought to be essential for projecting power and permanence, incorporating imperial motifs from diverse sources across time and space, the paper attempts to understand how the engagement with the past shaped their ideas. From ancient Egypt and Classical Antiquity to the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal era, various historical periods were relevant as sources from which symbols could be accessed, reflecting colonial perceptions of history. The paper also emphasizes the influence of the design for the ‘capitol complex’ in Pretoria, for conceptualizing the plan for New Delhi, which though obvious has often been overlooked.

Q&A 15 minutes

11:15 – 11:45 am
From an epistemological history of science to a historian’s history of science: a researcher’s tribulations through the transition
Kapil Raj
Shiv Nadar University

Abstract: The history of science made its entry into the academy as a special kind of history, an enquiry into what is known, its validity and scope, and the intellectual methods deployed. As such, it was akin, but not identical with the history of ideas. However, the domain underwent a sea change in the 1970s and moved to include sociological, anthropological and, not least, cultural historical dimensions into its core. As an academic trained within the classic tradition of the discipline — thus in philosophy — I floundered with questions that far surpassed its bounds, and with no established signposts, nor fellow travellers, to guide me. My intervention will present the way I muddled my way in formulating, and reformulating, my questions, finding sources to answer them, and having to negotiate an adequate equation between questions and sources.

Q&A 15 minutes

DISCUSSION Panel 1: 12:00 – 12:30

LUNCH 12:30-1:45 PM

PANEL 2: Thinking through the State
Chair: Kapil Raj

1:45 – 2:15 pm
Disturbed Areas, Emergency, and the History of the State in India
Bhavani Raman
Chennai

Abstract: Does a history of emergency laws entail a new history of the state and self-governance in India? In my presentation, I will trace the history of ‘disturbed areas’ and emergency regulations to the East India Company’s militarized governance of recalcitrant Rajas, Chiefs and Adivasis in the early
nineteenth century. By doing so, I will try to offer a genealogy of ‘disturbed areas’ laws in India in conjunction with the transformation and management of uncultivated landscapes. In my effort to draw out the history of emergency laws from the archives of military government I have begun to wonder if we need a new method and framework for understanding the Indian state—one that refuses to accept a framework of periodization and sovereignty that distinguishes between the pre-colonial and colonial but allows us to delve into its deep past without adhering to conventional arguments about continuity, collaboration or rupture. I also wonder how we can actively refrain from re-inscribing the state’s current territorial boundaries into the past. So my presentation will try to centre the inter-zone between the plains and the uplands, hinterland and seas as the theatre of state making, and will explore how the unfinished business of pacification might yield new ways to write about the history of the state in India. But most of all, I will try to use these archives to scrutinize a historiography of the Indian state that continues to radiate from the perspective of the cultivated plains.

Q&A  15 minutes

2:30 – 3:00 pm
Of Formal Chronologies and a Long-term Perspective of Premodern Indian History
Bhairabi Prasad Sahu
CAS, Department of History, University of Delhi
Abstract: Marxist historiography in its concern for providing a pattern for understanding Indian history, which also addressed the question of change through time, broadly worked out two stages in the context of early India. While the early historical extended up to and included the Gupta period, the sixth-twelfth centuries were seen to constitute the early medieval times. The identification of the early medieval with the idea of ‘Indian feudalism’, in fact, simultaneously helped in providing clarity to the defining features of the early historical period. This however, left the issue of the movement towards the medieval untouched, and the medievalists did not deem it necessary to engage with it seriously. That apart, it was assumed, though not explicitly said, that because with the coming of the Sultanate north India supposedly experienced a new socio-political system; the same must have been true, even if in varying degrees, for the rest of the sub-continent. Graduate and post-graduate students of the late 1960s and 1970s inherited and grew up absorbing these ideas. Meanwhile, the 1970s saw a turn towards the study of the regions for several reasons and that gradually complicated the grand narratives. Unease was expressed at various levels, including by those within what had by then become the dominant historiography. The next thirty years made it increasingly clear that South Asia was a conglomeration of regional specificities and the unfolding of historical processes were at most comparable across regions, and not similar. The trajectories, chronologies and ingredients in their making varied. The formation and understanding of regional societies, vernaculars and facets of culture, including identity, it was felt necessitated the invoking of different chronological scales. Engagements with issues such as these have led to some fascinating results, and more importantly the movement away from monicausality to causal plurality; and from epicentric perspectives to that of interacting, imitating and assimilating nodes through time.

Q&A  15 minutes

DISCUSSION Panel 2: 3:15 – 3:45 PM

TEA: 3:45 – 4:00 PM
Panel 3: Chronologies of Multilingual Life
Chair: Raziuddin Aquil

4:00 – 4:30 pm
A polyglot history for language?
Prachi Deshpande
Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta.
Abstract: My presentation will explore some methodological challenges in the historiography of language, drawing from my ongoing work on a ‘polyglot’ history of Marathi language practices. Languages have been located in history either via histories of literature, or via linguistics. The trajectories of individual languages shape to some extent the chronologies and narrative arcs of this historicization, but there are also broad patterns: of origins and evolution; modernization; geographical rootedness or spread, and of identity. While naming the precise linguistic object of study has often been a fraught process, histories of language has also been imbricated with those of regions and communities in complex, often anachronistic, ways. A focus on non-literary practices of bureaucratic documentation, moreover, causes trajectories and chronologies of state-formation, multilingual life, dispersed everyday practices, and deep conceptual and technological histories to clash and cross hairs with these often monolingual narratives of literary or linguistic development. How best, then, can such a polyglot history – one that meaningfully engages multilingual scribal worlds, linguistic hierarchies, language families, and diverse spaces of language practice – be coherently emplotted?

Q&A 15 MINUTES
Discussion and last thoughts for the day: 45 minutes

TEA: 5:15pm

Panel 4: Regions and Chronologies:
Chair: Anirudh Deshpande

10:00 – 10:30 am
Chronologies and Connections in the Upper Gangetic Valley: A Study of some aspects of Awadh region during India’s Medieval Past
S Z H Jafri
CAS, Department of History, University of Delhi
Abstract: The agrarian history of Mughal Awadh up to its annexation in 1856, with the help of archival/official records, private papers and chronicles opens up numerous avenues for the study of the social history of the period. The focus of my study remains documenting the Sufi centers and their relationship with the masses, rural overlords and the State. The study of this triangular relationship is particularly valuable from the unexamined history of the waqf institutions and other centres of learning under the
colonial regime. Through such studies, the processes of marginalization cutting across various periods could be examined at the micro level in a better way. The studies of the Great Uprising of 1857, the migration and dissemination of knowledge offer a unique window to understand rupture in a nuanced way. Cutting through the narratives of political history, it is the official records of the different regimes, indigenous discourse, textual and folk traditions surviving in various forms that complicate the linear narratives of existing histories. My presentation would revolve around these themes.

Q&A 15 minutes

10:45 – 11:15 am
Beyond Periods and Regions: Self-Reflections of an “Ancient” Historian of “South” India
Kesavan Veluthat
Institute for the Study of the Heritage of Coastal Kerala, Muziris International Research and Convention Centre, Kodungallur, Kerala,
Abstract: I seek to present a brief overview of how I studied history, because I cannot claim that I have “dismantled” any “fettered narrative”; nor can I claim that I have “charted alternative pathways”, or found “new questions, new materials (literary, archival and so on), and better [enabling] methodologies”. I narrate how I worked on my first book, The Brahmin Settlements in Kerala, in which I rejected some of the earlier assumptions; how I worked on the political structure of early medieval south India and proposed an alternative explanation to understand it in the place of the Nilakanta Sastri/Burton Stein model. I also talk about the problems that I confronted in the course of my work and the solutions I proposed to them. I also show how I was uncomfortable with my being described as an “ancient” historian specializing on “South India”. As I present this brief résumé of my work, I ask myself: have I done anything worthwhile?

Q&A 15 minutes

CONCLUSION TO THE WORKSHOP Discussion Panel 4: 11:30 – 12:00pm

LUNCH 12:15 –1:15 pm
LECTURE SERIES

Chair: Sunil Kumar

1:15 – 1:45 pm
Lecture 1:
The Great and Little Traditions of the Roman World
Kristian Kanstrup Christensen
University of Copenhagen
Abstract: My presentation will concern the possibility of using the anthropological model of ‘the Great and Little Tradition’ as a framework through which to understand the cultural interaction that took place within the Roman Empire. This model envisages agrarian civilisation as always consisting of two traditions. The great tradition is the culture of the elite, the little tradition is the culture of the local communities. In my paper, I argue that the Roman Empire should be approached as a pre-modern, agrarian empire comparable to other empires of that same world. Therefore the cultural interactions within the empire should not be approached through models developed for the study of the modern world. As a model designed for the study of agrarian civilisation, the model of ‘the Great and Little Tradition’ is a more appropriate framework in which to ground our understanding of Rome.
Q&A: 15 minutes

2:00 – 2:30 pm
Lecture 2:
Thinking comparatively and recentering the 17th century Islamic world
Ebba Koch
University of Vienna
Abstract: As historians of today we have to ask ourselves: do we need more micro or more macro? Macro confronts us with global which is a tricky issue; in my view the more global (and macro) it gets, the more superficial it can become. But, as Ginzburg explained (and long before him Friedrich Nietzsche), micro has a problem as well if it is simply monomaniacal. So one has to find a balance and I for myself find comparison of two components fruitful, given that one has specialised knowledge of each. And it is obviously of importance what one compares with what.
The issue I am taking on here is how the Mughals as a new dynasty related themselves to Iran. The paper has a strong comparative component. Since I am an art historian and a cultural historian I am interested in how the Mughals expressed their relationship with Iran in their art, the more so since architecture, painting and the applied arts became an indispensable instrument for the Mughal emperors in their imaginary formulations as world rulers.
I argue that in their ideological construction Mughal creativity with history was put to remarkable use. They laid claim to the Safavid position and appropriated the mythical Iranian past, usurping critical aspects of the history of the shahs and their identity. As I demonstrate in my presentation, with their ecumenical and hegemonic outlook, inspired artistic patronage and sense of glamorous performance it is the Mughals who emerged as the true heirs of mythical ancient Persian kingship.
Q&A 15 minutes
Combined Discussion of the two lectures: 2:45 – 3:15 pm
TEA: 3:15 – 3:30 pm
3:30-4:00 pm
Lecture 3:
Orphic Kingship between Rome and Delhi – reorienting precolonial world history
Peter Bang
University of Copenhagen
Abstract: This paper sets out in search for a precolonial world history and finds it in a league of universal monarchies reaching across Eurasia for centuries. World history has, for too long, been dependent on the themes, categories and temporalities of European history. But why would we expect the world to have been moving to the tune and rhythm of Europe before the age of colonialism forced societies across the globe into a close convergence. Clearly, a set of alternative concepts and chronologies are much in need.
Q&A 15 minutes

4:15 – 4:45 pm
Lecture 4:
The Devil is in the Elephant: Some thoughts on a method for studying kingship in medieval South Asia
Ali Anooshahr
University of California at Davis
Abstract: I have recently argued that the widespread use of elephants in early Ghaznavid monarchy (and sporadically throughout the era of the Delhi Sultanate and even Mughal rule) helps us understand anew and reconfigure what has been for long understood as the beginnings of “Islamic” rule in South Asia. This was because while the elephant often represented divinity in South Asia, it stood for satanic pride in the Koran. This means that the Ghaznavids’ insistence on using the animal despite its problematic association for their Muslim subjects, shows that the symbolism of their rule was as much or even predominantly directed towards non-Muslim monarchs in South Asia over whom they tried to claim imperial overlordship. This argument may seem counterintuitive and basically involves reading the bulk of early Indo-Persian historiography against the grain. I will discuss how such reading is possible by drawing essentially on a philology informed by the works of scholars mainly from the second half of the 20th century (such as Carlo Ginzburg, Robert Darnton, Michel Pastoure, and Jacques Derrida) whose work took seriously the problems of history and myth reconstructed through traces left in seemingly marginal and anomalous details in an otherwise normative mass.
Q&A 15 minutes

FINAL DISCUSSION: STUDENT INTERLOCUTORS:
Akshit Raj; Rabia Mehra; Arijit Chatterjee 10 minutes each 5:00-5:30 pm

TEA: 5:45 pm