



April 27, 2018

I am a Professor of Indian Religions at the University of Göttingen's Center for Modern Indian Studies. I received my PhD with Distinction in 2006 from the Department of Religion at Columbia University in New York. I have since taught at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom, and at the University of Pennsylvania's South Asia Studies Department. I have secured financial support for my research through a number of competitive fellowships in the United States, including from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Association of University Women, the Social Science Research Council and the American Institute of Indian Studies. Since taking up my current position in Germany in 2011, I have received competitive funding from the Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) and the Max Weber Foundation. My research centers on questions of caste and slavery, Indian secularism, religious minorities and religious conversion, and religion in politics. I work primarily in Tamil South India on modern history, but more recently in Southeast Asia as well, where I study the Tamil diaspora. I was also trained in classical and medieval Tamil, and maintain a strong interest in premodern Tamil history. It is in my capacity as a full professor of South Asia Studies that I write to describe the remarkable achievements of the South Asia Research and Information Institute (SARII).

I first became acquainted with SARII through the important interventions of Dr. S. Palaniappan, a founding member and current President of SARII, on an academic discussion forum for scholars of Indian religions. I was deeply impressed by his research and cogent arguments, especially in the fields of classical Tamil literature and culture. These fields, moreover, are in danger given the steep decline in the quality of higher educational institutions in the humanities and social sciences in India in recent decades. And yet accurate empirical knowledge about the past of South Asia is all the more essential in a global climate that increasingly requires sustained intercultural understanding. SARII has and continues to redress this growing gap in the production of socially useful knowledge, and, it should be noted, covers an important range of topics, from contentious questions about present-day policy, such as the conference on affirmative action in India, to very poorly understood phenomena, such as the history of Jainism in South India, on which Dr. Palaniappan has produced excellent research. Most importantly, it not only provides a forum for sustained engagement *among* academics, but *between* academics and the wider public, a task that is both essential and terribly neglected.

My initial impressions of SARII were only strengthened by my own experience of participation in a conference SARII hosted in Dallas in 2013. It was very carefully organized to maximize exchange of ideas, and ranks among the few events I have attended in a career of several decades which facilitated genuine and extended conversation between the public and academics, to great mutual benefit. I had the pleasure as well of meeting many of SARII's board members at that time, all of whom have other careers at which they have excelled, but consider

humanities and social scientific knowledge to be a requirement for an engaged public citizenry. It is an impressive agenda to carry forward and I am honored to have been part of it. Moreover, as a second-generation Indian who was born and spent a significant part of her childhood in the United States, I am particularly supportive of SARII because sources of accurate information on South Asia are few and far between outside the academy, where instead, increasingly, politically-motivated forms of “fake news” crowd out reasoned debate and serious engagement with issues, of the kind that SARII diligently promotes.

Given the wonderful successes they have already had, and the fact that they are engaged in critically important work that so few are taking on despite its necessity, it is crucial that SARII rests on firm financial footing. Ideally, a permanent endowment will allow them to not only carry forward their work, but to expand on it, bringing more scholars, students and citizens under their learned ambit. I should emphasize that the high quality work of SARII cannot be funded by academic foundations, of the kind I described above as being central to funding my own research, because SARII is not an academic institution. Their important intervention into public life—their insistence on spreading scholarship outside the narrow confines of the university—unfortunately and ironically makes them ineligible to receive funding from foundations that support academic research. Generous private sponsorships is therefore essential. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can provide further information on the importance of SARII to the future of South Asianist scholarship and to the production of a broader public that understands issues critical to the region.

Sincerely,



Prof. Dr. Rupa Viswanath
Chair of Indian Religions
Research Director, Cluster on Inequality and Diversity
Center for Modern Indian Studies