

## Introduction to the Forum

The genesis of this forum dates to March 2020, when The *Sixteenth Century Journal* sponsored a panel at the Asian Studies Development Program (ASDP) in Atlanta. Ghulam A. Nadri, Sonia Kapur, and Gary G. Gibbs braved the initial stages of the pandemic, as did other conference participants, to address topics that now appear here as their contributions to the Forum. Within days of the conference's end, America and much of the world shut down. Academics everywhere began to grapple with teaching in a pandemic, which typically meant teaching online. Academics responded. The *World History Bulletin* published "Teach in the Time of Corona(virus)" and the *Sixteenth Century Journal* began an online forum, which eventually led to the publication of a special edition of the journal "Teaching the Early Modern World in the Era of COVID-19."<sup>1</sup> Other examples abound. All the authors in this Forum, including those from the ASDP conference, have continued to develop their essays over the last two years and the appropriateness of their models for both research and teaching in the current culture is clear.

In terms of teaching there are principally two foundationally global topics here, teaching and a pandemic; the world is currently struggling with both. The pedagogic imperative in a pandemic is multimodal, as many teachers discovered globally and the essays here underscore. For teachers and learners, the distinction of home and workplace collapsed as the home *became* the classroom. Traditional spatial arrangements of the classroom proved redundant as the classroom began to follow the logic of cinema rather than the logic of the face-to-face class, even as worries of a new surveillance culture erupted. As Pramod K. Nayar has argued elsewhere, the online classroom provides the intersection of matter (the monitor, the camera) with the discourse (verbal speech acts) as never before.<sup>2</sup> More significantly, as a study published in the *European Journal of Teacher Education* noted, "digital teacher competence and teacher education opportunities to learn digital competence" were key factors in adaptation to online teaching, and teachers found the need to acquire new skill sets as well.<sup>3</sup>

All of these essays express and explore current pedagogical concerns. In the aggregate, this forum is interdisciplinary, drawing on the disciplines of history, sociology, public policy, film studies, religious studies and, of course, pedagogy. The authors provide some

practical information for the classroom and focus on numerous themes, but empathy is of particular importance.

One of the many important lessons in Sonia Kapur's essay is her presentation of active learning approaches. By using a varied combination of pedagogical and andragogical perspectives, she fosters a learning environment that privileges multiculturalism while accommodating the diverse needs of multiple types of learners. In her "Nation-Building, Identity and Diversity" course, Kapur identifies and employs visual media such as documentaries and televised debates as powerful means of inculcating empathy in students, while also exploring the nuances of intersecting religious, gender, and national identities. Kapur's use of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) projects merits close attention. Harnessing the potential of social media and video conferencing platforms such as Facebook and Zoom, Kapur's students work with peers from a university in a different country on a course project. As a result, students gain far more than content knowledge. The rapport students build with their international partners as they work together on the assigned projects, develops their intercultural and interpersonal skills. The empathy thus established between global partners goes a long way toward encouraging student cohorts at both participating institutions to adopt a more ethically and socially just perspective to problem solving. As Kapur's students remarked, at the end of their project assessments, the COIL course projects helped them become more attune to other voices and more aware of alternative narratives than those they hear habitually. This exposure to multiple perspectives in turn encouraged them to think more critically about alternative viewpoints.

As have other scholars before them who rely upon the use of mainstream Indian films in the classroom, Meeta Mehrotra and Gary G. Gibbs recognize the value such films bring to the classroom especially in terms of facilitating students' development of an empathetic and personally connected view of course materials. These films are impactful for several reasons. They offer students a window onto South Asian culture, society, and history; they operate as close to an "immersion" experience as possible without leaving the classroom. With appropriate historical and cultural contextualization, these films also challenge students to critique easily assumed stereotypes that derive from cross-cultural differences and offer opportunities in class discussion to move beyond a simplistic exoticization of the other. Mehrotra and Gibbs advocate that the use of mainstream Indian films delivers even greater potential for contemplating cultural commonalities or issues of common cultural concern such as gender, power, and consent that translate transnationally and cross-culturally.

The four films they select as case studies will provide students with ample opportunity to reflect upon women's experiences in both India and beyond. With harassment, sexual violence, abuses of power, and systemic gender bias, the films and the authors underscore women's insistence upon their fundamental rights to legal and political autonomy; a right to their own bodies. Despite the complexities of women's lives in India—where women of varying classes, castes, and religious backgrounds struggle to assert their identities in a

cultural milieu that normalizes the association of power with masculinity and high status—these cinematic explorations of power, gender, and consent will resonate with American students. They will be unfamiliar with a great deal of the culture they see presented, but will be familiar with attacks upon women’s characters, sexual double standards, sexual predation by men in power, etc.

As we write, Jeffrey Epstein, Ghislaine Maxwell, and the Duke of York are in the news, and their positions—a deceased billionaire who hobnobbed with politicians, a socialite, and a prince—makes for sensationalized headlines; meanwhile countless cases of child trafficking never make the national or international news. In America and beyond, women responded to the political currents of recent years with women’s marches around the country and #MeToo posts. But there has not been a march similar to those that took place in January 2017 in a while and the women of Texas have had their right to terminate a pregnancy severely restricted legally by actions of their state government and the US Supreme Court. Gender specific liabilities are always a topic for classroom discussion. Students and professors can also discuss how living in a COVID-19 world has further complicated these issues. The COVID-19 pandemic provides us with ample evidence of how a disease outbreak exacerbates existing social inequalities, impacting humanity differently not just based on climate or geography, but also based on ethnicity, wealth, status, and gender. Many splendid films coming out of India shine a light on these transnational issues and students will improve their global awareness when expected to grapple with the cultural nuances of such critical commentary on display in foreign cinema.

World History contextualization influences Ghulam A. Nadri’s article on the movement of people and things. His research focuses on the deliberate construction of financial instruments of banking and exchange (both objects and ideas) to facilitate the movement of people and products around the Indian Ocean. Using commenda contracts, limited and unlimited partnerships, bottomry loans, and a reliance upon Bania and Parsi bankers as brokers and agents, Muslim traders made a living while moving goods across the Indian Ocean. Nadri presents a different socio-economic model to emphasize the fact that the logistical and geographical dimensions of early modern Indian Ocean trade was only made possible by the collective and cooperative efforts of a spatially dispersed people with navigational and book-keeping skills. He places the economic/political system in a global context where religious differences did not prevent Muslim merchants from relying upon the expertise of agents and brokers of other faiths. Pooling capital and other resources, sharing risks, and drawing upon collective expertise are all actions that, as he points out, arise from a relationship of trust. Building trust, in turn, required empathetic investment in terms of interaction with these cultural others.

All the financial institutions that made wide-flung business ventures in the Indian Ocean possible were only useful if one could access them, which required making deals with people you trusted. Empathy matters in this model. Nadri’s conclusion about the

commercial complexities of South Asian Indian Ocean trade and syncretic nature of Islam in South Asia reminds us how we need to treat the topic of religion in the region. Lastly, the supporting abstracts of contemporary correspondence make good supplemental material for class discussion. They not only provide evidence of the importance of personal relationships of trust between brothers, other family members, and business partners in conducting business successfully, but also demonstrate how business deals were compromised when those relationships of trust failed.

John Maunu and Marc Jason Gilbert's "Digital Resources for Research and Teaching Pandemics in India in World History Perspective" will have great appeal to scholars, teachers, and students alike. Maunu and Gilbert have collected sources to aid in the construction of our current pandemic's historical and cultural context. The resource provides students suggested avenues for their own research and prepares them to ask better questions in the classroom. It provides instructors the ability to compare and contrast the current pandemic with, for example, the 1918 flu, as well as second and third pandemic waves of bubonic plague. Teaching while in a pandemic strongly encourages the adoption of lesson plans that employ critical thinking about the role of history and culture in the construction of, and responses to, a disease pandemic. At the same time, teachers experiencing the added workload associated with intermittent classes and the shifts back and forth between traditional and online course formats may find it daunting to invest the time required to develop the necessary contextualization. Fortunately, Maunu and Gilbert's digital database provides educators seeking a streamlined approach to constructing comparative case studies and lesson plans with a wealth of easily accessible information. The sections on plague in Bombay and Hyderabad warrant attention. Knowing the extent to which aggressive colonial attitudes and tactics engendered a culture of local distrust and vaccine resistance in the Bombay Plague of 1896 will prompt students to question how lingering influences of British colonialism might be a factor in post-colonial India's response to COVID-19. The Hyderabad Plague of 1911 will also encourage students to think about the ways in which government-mandated health policies result in changes to a city's physical landscape and infrastructure, whether that city be Hyderabad, Paris, or New York.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

In March 2020, UNESCO documented that 87 per cent of the world's school children had been affected by COVID-related school closures and cessation of learning. Drop-out rates and a decline in enrollment in US colleges has been reported in places such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* even as organizations such as the Organization for Economic and Co-Operation and Development (OECD) called for greater levels of engagement between parents and institutions and for policies to support families and teachers, among other measures.<sup>5</sup> This is the framing context for the current issue.

The original ASDP panel was proposed before the pandemic. The papers were written as the world first began to learn that a new and virulent virus was in the world. The papers were delivered in what must have been one of the last in-person academic conferences of 2020, and the novel coronavirus was a frequent point of conversation. In the interim, the authors revised the essays while learning how to teach via computers. Finally, the authors of this Introduction, Leeson and Nayar, wrote while in Paris and Hyderabad, respectively, with the assistance of a colleague in Roanoke, VA, for submission to the WHC editor on O‘ahu—all dealing with different government-mandated restrictions.

The pandemic has influenced everything, especially the new omicron variant. We have been following the numbers of new infections in India (*The Economic Times of India* has excellent, if shocking coverage). The American health and educational systems are struggling as new infections peak. By the time of publication, things will be different, except for the fact that teachers must teach, the world is interconnected, and we are all in this together.

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**Pramod K. Nayar** is a Professor of English at the University of Hyderabad, India. His most recent book publications include *Alzheimer’s Disease Memoirs* (Springer, 2021), *The Human Rights Graphic Novel* (Taylor & Francis, 2021), *Essays in Celebrity Culture* (Anthem, 2021), and *Indian Travel Writing in an Age of Empire, 1830–1940* (Bloomsbury, 2020). Forthcoming is a 5-volume edited collection, *From Discovery to the Civilisational Mission: English Writings on India*.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> “Teach in the Time of Corona(virus),” *World History Bulletin*, ed., Laura Mitchell 36,1 (Spring/Summer 2020) and “Teaching the Early Modern World in the Era of COVID-19,” a special edition of the *Sixteenth Century Journal*, eds., Jennifer Mara DeSilva, Whitney A.M. Leeson, and Barbara Pitkin LI (Summer 2020).

<sup>2</sup> Pramod K Nayar, "How the Camera has changed the Dynamics of the Classroom," *The Wire*, 14 May 2021. <https://livewire.thewire.in/campus/how-the-camera-has-changed-the-dynamics-of-the-classroom/>.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes König, Daniela J. Jäger-Biela & Nina Glutsch, "Adapting to online teaching during COVID-19 school closure: teacher education and teacher competence effects among early career teachers in Germany," *European Journal of Teacher Education* 43, no. 4 (2020): 608–22.

<sup>4</sup> See the database article's many examples of this issues, as well as Patik Chakrabarti, "Covid-19 and the Spectres of Colonialism," *The India Forum*, 7 Aug 2020, <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/covid-19-and-spectres-colonialism>, and Amna Khalid's "In India's Covid Crisis, Echoes of a Colonial Past," *Washington Monthly*, 22 May 2021, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2021/05/22/in-indias-covid-crisis-echoes-of-a-colonial-past/>.

<sup>5</sup> The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), "Strengthening online learning when schools are closed: The role of families and teachers in supporting students during the COVID-19 crisis," 24 September 2020, <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/strengthening-online-learning-when-schools-are-closed-the-role-of-families-and-teachers-in-supporting-students-during-the-covid-19-crisis-c4ecba6c/>.