

Ronald Inden

Medieval Coronations and Bollywood Films



Ronald Inden was born on May 23, 1940 in Chicago, Illinois. He received his Bachelor's degree in History at the University of Chicago in 1961, his Master's in Oriental Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago in 1963, spent two years, 1963-65, doing research in India, on a Foreign Area Fellowship Grant for research in India and East Pakistan (Bangladesh), and completed his Ph.D. in South Asian Languages and Civilizations; at the same university, in 1972. He is the author of three books, the latest of which is *Imagining India* (1990). He is Professor of History and of South Asian Languages and Civilizations; Associate Member, Anthropology, at the University of Chicago; and Professorial Research Associate, Centre of South Asian Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, at the University of London. He spends his summers mostly in London. — Addresses: Department of History, University of Chicago, 1130 E. 59th Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA; 34 Cloudesley Mansions, Cloudesley Street, GB-London, N1 OED.

I had more than one objective when I arrived at the Kolleg. Foremost in my mind was my desire to think through, if not complete, a manuscript on 'life-transforming practices' in medieval and modern India. I wanted to address two crucial questions in this book. One was the question of 'ritual' as a concept in the human and social sciences. I started my academic career working on the social history of the Bengal region of India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Dissatisfied with the representation of India as a social, that is, caste-dominated civilization or culture and hence, apolitical, I began to take an interest in the question of the political in Indian tradition, which led me to kingship and to what some considered the most important medieval text on that topic, the *Vi,ynudharmottara*. I have worked on that text, which I have dated to eighth-century Kashmir, for some fifteen years. On the way, I wrote *Imagining India*, which deals with the question of scholarly and not-so-scholarly representations of India since the early nineteenth century.

Over the past several years I have turned again to modern history. Increasingly my question was, how can we bring together the practices studied under the rubrics of modernity and tradition. Earlier in the century, when scholars were more confident about the distinctions between the traditional and modern, it made sense to use a concept of ritual to study wholly or largely traditional societies and the traditional elements that remained in modern societies. It is my sense, however, that such distinctions have become blurred and that many of the presuppositions on which these distinctions were based have come into question. Few would now accept the thesis of secularization or rationalization as inevitable. Some would even argue that there is no realm of necessity in economic matters, never mind in other 'softer' areas of life. If, as I argue, human activities are *underdetermined* by their circumstances (including human biology), then we can begin to see many of the practices that have been studied as rituals, on the one hand, or as the rational practices of political economy, on the other, as life-transforming practices, that is, as practices that aim to make determinations in the human world.

The idea of life-transforming practice which I have tried to develop while at the Kolleg attempts to rethink the older concept of ritual and make it possible to look at seemingly discrepant phenomena as the ceremonial bath and coronation of a medieval king, or the practices of central planning in an independent, modern India, within the same field without having to reduce one to the other. My experiences while at the Kolleg have led me to believe that by focussing both on imperial progresses and religious processions and on those practices and institutions of the modern state and economy which people see as progressive, I will be able to generate a focused, readable narrative. It is possible to show the historical connections between older progresses and the complex of practices we have come to call progress, both in India and in Europe. Some serious editing of unfinished chapters lies ahead of me, but by the end of the summer a manuscript should emerge in my computer.

My second wish was to develop my new interests in modern history. These grew out of my concerns with ritual and progress and are focused to a large extent on the history of the 'media' and 'development' after independence. (My year at the Kolleg happened to coincide with the fiftieth birthday of India's and Pakistan's independence. I have participated in two of these birthday parties, one in Heidelberg and the other in Berlin. As a result, I now have plenty of reflective and critical writing to analyze.) My main concentration has been on the popular Hindi film, which I have been studying assiduously now for almost three years. I brought many video cassettes of these films from Bollywood (Bombay's Hollywood) with me. I thought that I would study them alone and quiet-

ly in my room with a rental TV and was even somewhat fearful of what my learned colleagues would say if they found out what I was doing. How wrong I was! It turned out that several people at the Kolleg were either already acquainted with these films or were eager to find out more about them. The result is that we have had a series of public screenings of Hindi films in the TV Room of the Kolleg. This has not only been fun for us, the Hindi film club, but quite instructive for me as well. I have benefitted immensely from the comments and questions of my colleagues and their spouses and friends.

I had also, in connection with my interest in the media, wanted to explore the media scene in Germany, and especially in Berlin. This was also tied in with efforts to improve (some might say relearn) my German. I have made many important contacts and established some enduring relationships with several people in Berlin and elsewhere. In some ways, the highlight of my year was the presentation of a Hindi film to a special audience at the Kommunales Kino in Frankfurt am Main. I expect that my new German colleagues and I will initiate further showings and conferences on popular Indian films over the next few years.