

Beyond Disciplines: India Studies in the United States

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Since the creation of area studies in the US, India studies has occupied a marginal position in academia. The “power regions,” so to speak, of the area studies typology were first and foremost western Europe—often not sufficiently marked as an “area” but rather portrayed as the cradle of universalism—and of course the Soviet Union. Japan and China, and perhaps the Koreas, occupied the greater part of Asian studies. Geopolitical and geo-economic considerations, in which India and South Asia mattered little to American grand strategy, saw their priorities reflected in the marginality of India in US higher education. The third sector of nonprofit public education institutions, with little to research by way of immediate policy relevance in the region, similarly failed to invest in expertise on the region.

All this is changing rapidly, however, and the architecture of knowledge about India in the US has begun to undergo a profound shift. In the past decade, India’s growing strategic and economic power have demanded growing attention. Unlike in decades past, the US Congress, the US for-profit private sector, and the US nonprofit private sector have responded to this shift by investing in knowledge production on India and South Asia. Perhaps the most dramatic growth in attention has taken place in US business schools—a development that brings with it a significant number of epistemological drawbacks. One surprising result of these rapid changes has been that the traditional disciplinary study of India has become both more necessary as well as more marginal when measured against the instrumental drivers of the other sectors.

This essay surveys the state of India studies in the US, with a particular focus on how Americans have learned about India in the spaces

outside university disciplinary categorizations of political science, anthropology, religion, economics, and history. I first look at the institutional history of India studies in the United States, which has a trajectory extending much prior to the Cold War. That history has continued to structure the disciplinary emphasis and engagement on India within the academy. Second, I look at the development of university capacity to offer India-focused programs of study, including the foreign language collection capabilities provided by libraries and the emergence of South Asia area studies centers. I then take a broad view of India scholarship defined beyond the ivory tower as it has been discussed more typically in overviews.¹ Looking at recent shifts in the location of knowledge production allows us to perceive a flourishing new space of India studies. This new space has, for better or for worse, begun to eclipse the traditional disciplinary fields in the public sphere of discussion on India. I argue that, barring some major rethink of the relationship of universities and their role in society, the public sphere in the United States will increasingly look to this new space—as it already has begun to do—for its India knowledge rather than to the traditional disciplines, which suggests challenge as well as opportunity for the role of India scholars within the disciplines.