

ESIND Research Clusters

COST Action 23144

Europe's Representations of India: Texts, Images, and Encounters

(a) ESIND Research Cluster: "India in European Education: Teaching and Practices"

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Within the framework of the existing COST Action, we propose the establishment of a cluster focused on the interdisciplinary study of how India is represented in European education at primary, secondary, and higher levels. The cluster aims to examine the extent, scope, and disciplinary perspectives through which India is addressed across different national educational systems.

India is approached through a range of subjects, including geography, history, religion, languages, literature, cultural studies, tourism, and other social sciences and humanities, with notable variations in depth and emphasis among countries.

Data will be collected through questionnaires and, where appropriate, interviews with teachers in primary and secondary schools, as well as university lecturers and researchers. This will enable a comparative overview of the subject areas, teaching content, and pedagogical approaches used.

Based on the findings, the cluster will identify good practices and existing gaps, and propose recommendations aimed at strengthening interdisciplinary and intercultural approaches to the study of India within European education.

(b) ESIND Research Cluster: "Indian Stories in European Representations"

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Stories are a significant part of Indian culture. These Indian stories are often embedded in diverse storytelling traditions that make use of different media, such as oral traditions, painting traditions, classical dance, etc. In exploring their role within Indian culture, another question arises: how were Indian stories initially understood by Europeans? How were these stories described and characterised? These will be our guiding questions. The thematic scope of this Research Cluster is quite broad, allowing the researchers involved

to focus on various themes, depending on their personal interests and expertise. For example, some might take an interest in stories about particular places or events; others could choose to investigate stories about a specific person or about deities; and yet others might prefer to focus on stories belonging to a particular community, region or period. By examining European descriptions of diverse Indian stories, written in various European languages, we might discover patterns that could help us gain insights into European attitudes towards Indian culture.

(c) ESIND Research Cluster: “Everyday Life and Modernity in Post-Independence India: European Travelers’ Perspectives (1947-1970s)”

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This research cluster examines how European travelers and intellectuals observed and wrote about daily life in India during the first decades after independence. Unlike colonial-era writings that focused on exotic customs or political control, these post-1947 accounts document a new nation’s efforts to modernize while maintaining its cultural identity.

The cluster focuses on travel writings, letters, memoirs, and reports from Europeans visiting India between 1947 and the 1970s. These visitors wrote about ordinary experiences: riding trains, attending weddings, eating street food, visiting hospitals and schools, observing women's roles, listening to music, and watching cities change. Their accounts offer valuable perspectives on how independent India appeared to outsiders during a critical period of transformation.

Niyazi Berkes’ “Asya Mektupları” (Letters from Asia, 1958-59) serves as one key text for this cluster. Berkes, a Turkish sociologist, traveled through India and Pakistan and wrote detailed observations about education, medicine, religion, class differences, wedding traditions, food culture, music, trains, and women's lives. His letters provide a non-colonial European perspective on South Asian modernization.

The research cluster welcomes scholars working on similar materials from their own countries. Many European nations sent educators, doctors, engineers, journalists, writers, and scholars to India during this period. Their writings exist in national archives, university collections, and family papers across Europe. Some published books, others wrote articles or personal letters. Together, these sources create a rich picture of post-independence India through diverse European eyes.

The cluster seeks to answer several questions: How did European visitors perceive India’s modernization projects? What aspects of daily life attracted their attention? How did their observations differ from British colonial writings? Did visitors from smaller European nations see India differently than those from former colonial powers? What can these accounts tell us about Indian society during this transitional period?

(d) ESIND Research Cluster: “The Female Gaze in the European Encounter with India”

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As part of the ESIND Cost Action, we are planning to create a special research group focusing on the study of “the female gaze in the European encounter with India.” Our aim is to explore how women (through their writings, observations, and reflections) have contributed to shaping European understandings of Indian society, culture, and spirituality.

While much attention has been given to male explorers, missionaries, and scholars, women have also played a significant yet often overlooked role in mediating ideas about India. Through their travel diaries, letters, memoirs, and other documents, women expressed distinctive perspectives on Indian people, customs, and philosophies. Some of them also became interpreters and transmitters of Indian spiritual and literary traditions, helping to shape cross-cultural dialogues between India and Europe.

(e) ESIND Research Cluster: “European Representations of Health Care in India”

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The aim of this research cluster is to investigate the intersection of biomedical discourse and colonial narratives in European representations of India during the 18th and 19th centuries. This includes examining how medical language, metaphors, and colonial health concerns are embedded in European literary texts, political reports, Empire propaganda, and travel and missionary narratives related to India, etc. We aim to compile a corpus of primary texts and archival materials illustrating how biomedical language operated within European colonial literature about India. This will inform a broader study in Medical Humanities of how science and empire intersected in European cultural history.

We will look at extract passages illustrating how health, disease, and the body were used rhetorically to justify colonial governance or frame India as a biomedical 'other'. We need to consult the Special Collections and Archives for relevant literary texts, travel writings, and periodicals by European authors with colonial connections to India. Using catalog searches and on-site assistance, we intend to identify key primary texts and begin annotating them for medical and colonial discourse markers. Particular focus will be on:

- Medical treatises and ethnographic writings by European physicians in India.
- East India Company records.
- Reports and travel diaries by religious missions to India.
- Digitised or microfilm archives of 19th-century journals that include medical reports, reviews, and serialized fiction.
- India Office publications, including Indian Medical Gazette.
- Rare pamphlets and documents.
- Parliamentary papers related to public health and the British Empire in India.
- Personal letters, marginalia, and annotated editions of texts by colonial figures.
- Medical School archives for insight into the training and global postings of European doctors and midwives in India.

- We will pay special attention to the representation of Indian women's health, the reconstruction and representation of masculinity, and will also look into contemporary literary representations of this topic.

(f) ESIND Research Cluster: "Ethno-spatial and Sacred Imaginaries: Locating the Himalayas in the European Imagination"

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This proposal begins with the premise that in order to investigate and comprehend the category 'India' one has to look at sub-regional and regional sites/perspectives as much as on macro perceptions of the Indian subcontinent. Perhaps no other region or physical terrain has attracted the European imagination as much as the Himalayan mountain range located in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent stretching from the West to the East for more than 3000 kms. Its lofty peaks and high-altitude geographical terrain have drawn scores of explorers, mountaineers, surveyors & cartographers, painters, travellers, photographers, botanists, ethnographers and anthropologists among others from Europe but has also played an active role in European imagination as an abode of spirituality and tranquillity.

This proposal seeks to make a collaborative pitch for drawing upon literary and visual archives from scholars of multiple European languages to draw upon the theme of 'spatial imaginaries' to explore varied dimensions of the Himalayas as a religio-social and visual space. It would be particularly interesting to engage upon the sub threads of 'visual depictions of the Himalayas' in the works of British painters such as Thomas & William Daniell, the Frenchman Victor Jacquemont, the Russian painter Nicholas Roerich, the Italian photographer Vittorio Sella among others and explore how it influenced European painters, artists and photographers.

The other thread that may be drawn upon would be the ethnographic imagination of the Himalayan world. From the lesser-known Czech explorers Karel Weiss, Jindrich Kana and Jan Kral, to the Italian Filippo de Filippi in the late 19th century, to the 20th century Austrian ethnographer Cristoph von Furer-Haimendorf (1909-1995) whose archive is one of the most prolific. His works such as *The Naked Nagas* (1939), *The Sherpas of Nepal* (1964), *The Apa Tanis and Their Neighbours* (1962), *Himalayan Traders* (1975), and *Himalayan Barbarous* (film series and essays) constitute a veritable reservoir.

The final strand that may be explored is the idea of the mystical Himalayas as a repository of spirituality par excellence. From 19th century Romantic poets to the theosophical ideas of Madame Blavatsky, from the Swedish explorer Sven Hedin (1865–1952), from Victor Jacquemont (1801–1832) Édouard Frossard, and Alexandra David-Néel in France, from Rudolf Steiner and Karl Eugen Neumann in Germany, and so on.

(g) ESIND Research Cluster: “Alternative Representations of India in Central and South-Eastern Europe”

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For some time now, European scholarship on India has recognised the complexity and layered nature of modern European representations of India. This is partly because different parts of Europe have looked to India for different reasons, shaped by their own historical preoccupations and cultural and political associations with the Subcontinent. Although a large body of scholarship exists on former European colonial nations and their portrayal of India, not enough has been done a) to highlight responses from Central and South-Eastern Europe and b) to bring them into a larger comparative context.

This research cluster seeks to explore representations that diverge from traditional colonial binaries. While we will continue to pay close attention to ideas and images that reflect entrenched European stereotypes—still propagated by various actors across society, including those in culture, religion, politics, academia, literature, and even by modern-day travellers, spiritual seekers, and tourists—the cluster aims primarily to highlight the perceived struggles and interests between Indians and Europeans. In doing so, we will also seek to identify representations of India that are specific to particular Central and South-Eastern European regions and examine whether any shared conceptual patterns emerge between regions with and without a colonial history.

Some key questions that need to be addressed are: How can certain Europeans move beyond the constraints of a shared discourse to develop different experiences and descriptions of India, its people, and its religious traditions? What is conceptually needed to formulate such descriptions? Do these alternative descriptions have any longer duration in the given intellectual milieu, or are some ancillary theories formulated to explain away these anomalies and save the prevalent discourse? How can this focus on alternative European representations of India enrich or challenge our understanding of what is still customarily referred to as Indian society, culture and religion?

(h) ESIND Research Cluster: “Europe and India: Representations and Encounters in Philosophy”

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The Research Cluster will be structured around two complementary sub-themes, each allowing for focused and productive collaboration while being broad enough to involve a substantial number of ESIND participants.

Theme 1: Representations of India in European philosophy

When examining European representations of India, scholarship often focuses on literature, travelogues, art, or the media. Yet philosophy has been one of the most influential sites for producing symbolic, epistemic, historical, and moral representations of Indian culture and society. Philosophical discourse presents itself as objective, rational, and universally valid, which grants the representations it generates a conceptual authority that often surpasses that of vernacular or popular materials, contributing to

more persistent forms of prejudice. For this reason, one aim of the cluster is to map recurring descriptive patterns used by European philosophers – from a variety of linguistic and geographic contexts across Central, Eastern, Southern, Northern, and Western Europe – in their characterizations of Indian history, geography, and intellectual traditions. Examples include tropes of excess or magnitude, as well as notions of abstraction, spiritual interiority or emptiness. Beyond cataloguing these patterns, the cluster will also investigate how philosophers position themselves in relation to India: do they engage with fascination, curiosity, civilizational anxiety, or genuine philosophical interest? In which aspects of their thought is India mobilized—historical-philosophical, religious, aesthetic, or metaphysical? Addressing these questions will help determine whether philosophers merely formalize representations already circulating within the broader European imagination, or whether they actively contributed to creating new symbolic constructions of India that subsequently shaped wider cultural perceptions.

Theme 2: European Representations of Indian philosophy

The second sub-theme inverts the perspective and examines the European construction of “Indian philosophy” as an object of knowledge. The protagonists here include philosophers – from Schlegel and Goethe to Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, or Simone Weil – as well as non-philosophical scholars, philologists, missionaries, and contemporary intellectuals who have engaged with Indian systems of thought. One challenge concerns the very category of “philosophy” as applied to India. A core task of the cluster will be to trace the historical emergence, uses, and limitations of this label. Can heterogeneous traditions – Vedic, Upaniṣadic, Buddhist, Jain, and others – be assimilated under the single European term “philosophy”? Do India and Europe share a continuous philosophical history as some 19th-century thinkers claimed, or is the imposition of a European category a form of epistemic distortion? The discovery of Sanskrit and the diffusion of Indological scholarship in Europe during the eighteenth century forced European philosophers to confront the possibility of non-European philosophical worlds. This cluster will examine how they responded: whether their engagement was shaped by curiosity, universalist aspirations, modesty, or conversely by Eurocentric scepticism regarding India’s philosophical status. The cluster will thus explore which concepts European thinkers focused on (e.g., Brahman, Ātman, Yoga) and how these conceptual encounters contributed to broader European debates on metaphysics, ethics, rationality, and the boundaries of philosophy itself. More broadly, the cluster will also contribute to a historical “pre-genealogy” of comparative philosophy by asking to what extent Indian and European philosophical traditions developed independently, converged at specific points (such as in Greco-Indian exchanges or Neoplatonism), or mutually influenced one another.

(i) ESIND Research Cluster: “Jesuit Image(s) of India”

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The Jesuits played a major role in creating images of India in European culture after the sixteenth century, though their influence waned since the 1700s. They fashioned much of what Europe read and discussed about India for two centuries (ca. 1540-1759). No other European institution in the early modern epoch wrote more texts, published more

material, circulated more ideas, and shaped more concepts on India than the Society of Jesus. With a foot on the ground, they produced the first comparative anthropological, ethnological, religious, linguistic, literary, and historical discourses on India. Some Jesuits translated the first modern versions of Indian classics (as the Panchatantra and a very abridged version of the Mahabharata) into European vernacular languages. They made the first inroads into acculturation, trying to bridge Indian and Western civilization with mixed results in the fields of art, culture, and religion. Other Catholic religious orders and later Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican missionaries followed suit, but far less impactful than the Jesuits. Yet, the Jesuit outcome was varied at best, as most of their materials were produced to publicize their missionary activity, sometimes manipulating information to aggrandize their achievements, and had a strong polemical character (often portraying Indian culture, religions, and society negatively), as they aimed to convert Indians to Catholicism.

Despite these shortcomings, which must be taken into account when analyzing their texts, Jesuit materials on India (Annual Letters, miscellaneous correspondence, treatises on Hinduism, tracts on Indian castes, regional histories, etc., either manuscript or printed) remain a substantial and crucial source to understand what Europeans wrote about and how they fashioned European representations of India. This vast array of texts covers most of the subcontinent, providing an insight to how Europeans saw, described, and crafted representations of India for two centuries. More contemporary religious contributors are also important, though they carry less weight in molding Europe's image of India.

Though many documents written by the Jesuits lie still as manuscripts in archives and libraries (particularly in their central archive in Rome, ARSI), many of their texts have been published since the 1540s, namely the *Documenta Indica* (20 volumes covering the sixteenth century). Jesuit letters on India have been translated and printed in various European languages (Portuguese, Spanish, French, Italian, Flemish, German, etc.) and in Latin (the cultured language of the Western world), either individually or grouped in collections from the middle of the 1500s onwards in a singular editorial endeavor unknown in early modern Europe connected with the Society's printing strategy (covering their early individual efforts to the great collections of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, like Fernão Guerreiro's *Relaçam Annal...* and the *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*).

Furthermore, narrative texts written by Jesuits on Indian history, society, religion, literature, and culture have been published (though many remain untouched in archives and libraries), providing an endless source for study, edition, and translation. However, we must recognize that not everything was created for printing; some materials were intended for internal use only, while others were meant for publication but stayed in manuscript form. Less well-known, yet also interesting and important, is their contribution to art and architecture in India, where artistic hybridization took place—in painting and sculpture—as well as Indian-related artifacts like textiles, ivories, furniture, and more, which they brought to Europe. Not to mention representations of India and Indian themes in their European churches and colleges. Jesuit iconography concerning India remains a significant area of study, ranging from allegorical representations (including those of their missionaries working locally, like Francis Xavier or João de Brito) to directing Indian artists to create paintings and illustrations depicting the life and religions of the Subcontinent.

The field of study and translation of Jesuit-related materials is almost endless, and the ESIND team members who have already shown interest in participating in this cluster cover a stimulating cross-section of research fields, promising interesting outcomes.

(j) ESIND Research Cluster: “Protestant Missionary Movements from Europe and America to India: A Prosopographic and Institutional Representation Database (18th–20th Centuries)”

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This research cluster aims to examine Protestant missionary movements from Europe and America to India between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing on both individual actors and institutional structures. During this period, missionary organizations from England, the United States, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, and the Danish-Halle tradition produced a large and diverse corpus of writings on India. These materials reflect not only the personal observations of individual missionaries but also the ideological, theological, and cultural strategies through which missionary institutions constructed representations of Indian society, religion, and culture.

The research cluster will operate along two complementary axes.

(1) Prosopographic Axis: Individual Missionaries: This axis will investigate the identities, educational backgrounds, linguistic training, regional activities, and textual output of Protestant missionaries active in India. Primary sources will include letters, travel accounts, field reports, educational materials, diaries, dictionaries, and translation projects. A preliminary prosopographic dataset of 200 missionaries, prepared previously by the Lead Coordinator, will serve as the foundation and will be expanded collaboratively by cluster members.

(2) Institutional Axis: Missionary Organizations and Their Publications: Missionary representations of India circulated largely through organizational periodicals and reports. For this reason, the cluster will undertake a selective and representative analysis of institutional publications, including:

- Missionary Herald (American Board – ABCFM)
- Church Missionary Intelligencer (CMS – England)
- Evangelical Missionary Register (LMS – England)
- Danish-Halle mission reports

These publications are essential for understanding standardized discourses relating to Indian society, religious practices, caste, gender norms, moral reform, and the broader ideology of “civilizing” missions. They constitute the core material for the cluster’s institutional analysis.

(k) ESIND Research Cluster: “Indian Thought in Romantic Visions of Europe”

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This project would investigate how India—particularly its religious and philosophical traditions—was represented by lesser-known European Romantic intellectuals, writers, and philosophers and how these ideas were integrated into their historiographical and cultural visions of a “New Europe.” For Polish Romantics, India often appeared as a spiritual Urheimat and a mirror of Europe’s renewal. Their engagement with Indian concepts was not mere exoticism, but a part of a broader intellectual project aimed at reimagining Europe as grounded in universal spiritual principles, with partitioned Poland envisioned as playing a special role in this transformation.

During the Romantic period, European intellectuals increasingly turned to the Orient as a source of “primordial wisdom.” In Poland, thinkers such as August Cieszkowski, Karol Libelt, Bronisław Trentowski, Leszek Dunin-Borkowski, and writers like Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki engaged deeply with Indian religious and philosophical ideas. These engagements intersected with messianic historiosophy and the aspiration to renew Europe spiritually and morally. Understanding these intellectual exchanges sheds light on the transnational dimensions of Romanticism and its universalist ambitions.

Primary Goal: Examine how Indian religious and philosophical concepts were appropriated, reinterpreted, and integrated into European Romantic visions of a renewed Europe.

Specific Objectives

- Identify lesser-known figures and works that reference India in the context of European renewal.
- Analyse the role of Indian concepts in shaping universalist visions of Europe.
- Trace processes of adaptation and reinterpretation of these concepts within Romantic historiosophy.
- Compare thematic parallels between different European visions of ‘new Europes.’

Sample research questions

- Which Indian ideas appear in European Romantic texts and how were they mediated through Orientalist scholarship
- What thematic parallels emerge between European Romantic visions of a spiritually reformed Europe?

(l) ESIND Research Cluster: “Visual, Material, and Museum Culture”

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This research cluster proposes to investigate the visual representations of India from the early modern period to the twentieth century, examining how the subcontinent has been depicted, mapped, and imagined across different media and cultural contexts. India has

long been a site of visual fascination and exchange, where artistic practices, scientific observation, and imperial ambition intersected. From early Portuguese and Dutch cartographies to British colonial surveys, from the drawings of European travellers to the photographs of Indian studios, visual materials have shaped global perceptions of India while also reflecting complex processes of cultural translation, power, and resistance.

This cluster focuses on the ways Europe has historically produced, curated, and circulated representations of India, and how these visual/material regimes continue to shape perceptions and knowledge today. Departing from visual representations—maps, drawings, photographic archives, and object collections—we aim to study how these collections have travelled to Europe, what they represent, and the story behind their creation.

These collections did not merely document India; they actively participated in crafting a European understanding of “tribal India,” “exotic India,” “spiritual India,” etc. constituting an evolving visual archive of empire. For our joint cluster, this provides a compelling bridge between visual culture, ethnographic representation, and museum display, from colonial-era documentation to contemporary curatorial reinterpretations. Considering the increasing dominance of the visual culture in the interpretation of places, a contemporary comparative study of sources cannot disregard how biases, omissions, and techniques are conveyed through images and objects. We could work hands-on with collections - both local and through digital or travelling archives - in methods of analysing museum collections, visual material, and exhibitionary representation, etc.

The group seeks to bring together historians of art, cartography, photography, architecture, and material culture, as well as scholars in postcolonial and visual studies, to address how these images and collections both constructed and contested ideas of “India.” Central questions include: How did visual forms mediate cross-cultural knowledge and authority? What role did Indian artists, artisans, and intermediaries play in producing these visual records? How do colonial and missionary archives interact with indigenous and local modes of representation? And how can the study of these images inform current debates about decolonising museums, archives, and visual heritage?

(m) ESIND Research Cluster: “The Bilateral Relations between Yugoslavia and India (1948 – 1991), in the Context of the Non – Aligned Movement”

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Since its foundation in 1961, the Non-Aligned Movement has a global significance, involving the majority of states in the world. The history of the Non-Aligned Movement can involve in ESIND a respectable number of scholars from India, who will present their perspective regarding the bilateral relations with Yugoslavia in the time frame (1948 – 1991).

Participants of this research cluster can be ESIND members coming from the post-Yugoslavian space that are already participating (Croatia, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia), as well as inviting new participants from Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro. Also, there is a possibility of inviting scholars from India who are interested to participate in this research cluster.