Everything moves, or does it? Empires and im:mobility

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In 1937, British India issued a series of postage stamps featuring the newly crowned King George VI. In them, the monarch shares the frame with an unlikely cast: a postman on foot, an ox cart, a horse-drawn carriage, a camel, a train, a steamer, a motorcar and an airplane (figure 1). As David Arnold (Warwick) noted in his keynote for the workshop *Empire and (im-)mobility in South and Southeast Asia, 19th and 20th centuries*, this series depicts an

Fig. 01
British India postage stamps, King George VI Transport Series, 1937. (Public domain)

Fig. 02
The organisers Siddharth Pandey (left) and Harald Fischer-Tiné (Photo: Siddharth Pandey)

‘imperial ordering of mobilities’ in miniature: a visual narrative of progress from human- to animal- to machine-powered mobility that also reminds us, however, that these varied modes of transportation and communication were all connected.

Held in New Delhi on 6–7 February 2026 and co-organised by Siddharth Pandey (Munich/New Delhi) and Harald Fischer-Tiné (Munich/Zurich), both fellows at gd:c, the workshop invited participants to consider how mobility and immobility have been historically shaped, enabled and enforced in relation to one another. Over two days, scholars traced the movement of bicycles, planes, machines, seamen, writers and criminals across borderlands, oceans and empires. Relating the (post)colonial contexts of South and Southeast Asia to the British and Dutch Empires, the event also sought to open transimperial perspectives on the history of im:mobility.

As Arnold observed in his keynote, historians of these regions have long studied movement through migration, trade, epidemics and the circulation of ideas. The workshop’s contribution therefore lay less in demonstrating that movement has a history than in exploring the analytical utility of im:mobility for historians in terms of what it can reveal about how empires were governed and infrastructures built, how people imagined space, and how bodies experienced the world.

Power: regimes of im:mobility

A central theme that emerged throughout was that im:mobility makes power visible. Several contributions tackled questions like who gets to move, who gets stopped, why and how; they focused on regulation and governance, revealing colonial rule as a project that relied on controlling motion. Yet, as several papers showed, that control was always incomplete. Colonial and postcolonial

regimes alike had to contend with the fact that their visions of absolute regulation of their constituents' im:mobility were often at odds with the practicalities of implementation.

Michaela Dimmers (New Delhi) demonstrated this tension in her account of British Indian prisons. Convicts, she showed, were simultaneously highly mobile through no will of their own and intensely immobile through their confinement. The penal regime aspired to total control, but the everyday realities of prison show that im:mobility was constantly negotiated and compromised in practice.

Abhimanyu Pandey's (Ahmedabad) paper focused on how im:mobility is tied up with the notion of remoteness, viewing the latter as a governmental category. In Spiti, on the Indo-Tibetan border, colonial and postcolonial regimes alternately restricted and expanded access through mobility infrastructures in the interest of state sovereignty.

Focusing on a different border, Vaibhav Bhardwaj (Delhi) traced how criminal mobility became a test case for fragile state sovereignty after the partition of British India. The movement of criminals between India and Pakistan challenged newly drawn borders, turning criminal mobility into a territorial dispute and a performance of sovereignty.

Similarly invoking the instability and malleability of mobility regimes after partition, Naina Manjrekar (Bombay) showed how the recruitment and movement of seamen between India and Pakistan can be read as a clash between established colonial and newly forming postcolonial regimes of im:mobility.

Shivangi Jaiswal (Venice) also reflected on links between labour and mobility through a case study of Indian workers who were

Fig. 03
Siddharth Pandey (left) and Harald Fischer-Tiné (Photo: Abhimanyu Pandey).

sent to wartime Britain for technical training in the 1940s. Her contribution demonstrated how even a colonial-era regime that explicitly sought to enable both physical and social mobility was tightly controlled and socially stratified.

Knowledge: techno-mobility, infrastructures and im:mobile ideas

A second cross-cutting theme at the workshop concerned the relationship between mobility and knowledge. In the 19th and 20th centuries, mobility and its meanings were bound to new technologies that transformed how people moved in space. Several papers explored the emergence of this modern 'techno-mobility': im:mobility mediated by machines, infrastructures and technical expertise.

Philipp Krauer (Zurich) told the story of the 'Java bogie', a locomotive component that travelled from Switzerland to the Dutch East Indies and eventually to colonial India. This case study unsettles narratives of direct technological diffusion from colonial metropoles to their peripheries by including lateral transcolonial conncections and European countries without colonial possessions.

Andreas Greiner (Washington, DC) traced how interwar imperial aviation forced a renegotiation of airspace sovereignty. Here, inter-imperial technological rivalry ran up against the practicalities of planning intercontinental aerial routes, forcing empires such as the Dutch, British and French into 'involuntary interdependence', each reliant on access to the colonial skies of others.

Oishi Dhar (Mānoa) zoomed in on Bengal, where over the 19th and early 20th centuries, Indian entrepreneurs adapted steam navigation technologies and 'vernacularised' them, transforming the steamship into a tool of swadeshi economic self-reliance and shipping ideas of anti-colonial assertion to new shores.

Arnab Dutta (Groningen) examined the Greater India Society, whose intellectuals responded to imperial restrictions on Asian mobility by imagining alternative international migration regimes; the resulting visions of, for example, an 'Asiatic *Lebensraum*' reframed im:mobility in the anti-liberal logics of biologised civilisational units and population ecology.

Teuku Reza Fadeli (Jakarta) and Harald Fischer-Tiné's papers both focused on an everyday technology of mobility, the bicycle, and considered how this technology was rendered governable in colonial Indonesia and India, respectively, by restricting and policing its use. At the same time, both contributions also showed how those restrictions, which in

Fischer-Tiné's framing constituted a form of 'mobility inequality', gradually eroded, leading to appropriations of cycling that challenged imperial and class hierarchies.

Experience: embodied, imagined and symbolic im:mobilities

Throughout the workshop, participants repeatedly discussed who moved, how that movement (or its absence) felt and what symbolic value it carried. Several papers attended to mobility as a bodily experience, or how walking, cycling and even standing still leaves traces in muscle and memory.

Fadeli and Fischer-Tiné also focused on such aspects in their papers. In urban colonial Indonesia, for example, police manuals prescribed posture and speed for cyclists: colonial governance there was enforced by regulating the behaviour of bodies in motion. In colonial India, European observers questioned whether 'Oriental' bodies could master the 'steel horse'. Both contributions made clear that im:mobility was not only a question of technology and governance, but also fundamentally of cultural and social symbolism.

Siddharth Pandey explored this symbolism of movement, and how it could transform over time by shining light on a unique mode of mobility: 'malling', as residents of Shimla describe the act of walking on the town's Mall Road. He explained how an activity that, in the colonial era, was a symbol of racial and social segregation, could become a more democratised leisurely practice in the postcolonial period, though it continued to be seen as a performance of social and political status.

Fig. 04
gd:c goes mobile, discussing im:mobility 6000 km from headquarters (Photo: IIC Dehli).

Mihir Jha (Delhi) showed how railway connectivity transformed the imagination of Chhotanagpur in colonial East India. New mobility infrastructure, he argued, brought upper-class travellers from Calcutta to the region, which opened a new way of reading the landscape – one that romanticised its pastoral and picturesque character, all while obscuring the industrialisation that made it accessible.

Gregory Goulding (Philadelphia) traced mobility's symbolic life through the travelogues of Rahul Sankrityayan. The writer once styled himself a free-spirited wanderer challenging imperial restrictions on movement but later deployed the tropes of travel writing to incorporate the Himalayan region of Kinnaur into the imagined space of the new nation.

What else can im:mobility do for historians?

This workshop demonstrated that the mobilities paradigm, while certainly not novel, remains what Arnold called a 'productive provocation' for historians of South and Southeast Asia. Bringing together these diverse papers reinforced the value of thinking about the interconnections between different forms of im:mobility, as opposed to considering each mode or machine as an isolated case study. This perspective recentres marginalised aspects of mobility history. Arnold's call to attend to animal mobility was a particularly salient example, laying out a convincing case for a multispecies history of im:mobility.

Arnold also pointed to a central methodological challenge many papers grappled with implicitly: it is difficult for historians to capture the experience of im:mobility, as they mostly encounter it through mediated forms, like photographs, travelogues or stamps, each of which carries its own conventions and agendas. Several presenters illustrated their papers with striking photographs, making evident that visual technologies have long shaped how mobility is imagined and valued. Such images did not merely document im:mobility, but actively shaped its meanings, infusing it with symbolic values like modernity, authenticity and social status.

The discussions also highlighted questions for future research. Participants pointed to the need to explore the relationship between mobility and immobility more explicitly and to attend to im:mobility's historical stratification in terms of how journeys repeat or reinvent themselves with reference to previously charted paths. Finally, one form of im:mobility remained curiously underexplored: social im:mobility. In the concluding discussion, the concept of 'motility' – the potential for movement as a type of social capital – was suggested as a helpful approach to consider how the (in)ability to move shaped hierarchy, aspiration and identity in colonial and postcolonial societies.