



# Challenges and Insights from South Asia for Imagining Ethical Organizations: Introduction to the Special Issue

Fahreen Alamgir<sup>1</sup> · Hari Bapuji<sup>2</sup> · Raza Mir<sup>3</sup>

Received: 23 January 2022 / Accepted: 7 March 2022 / Published online: 28 March 2022  
© The Author(s) 2022

## Abstract

South Asia is a region that two billion world citizens call home. It connotes not only a geographical place but a discursive space that, despite its heterogeneities of ethnicity and political experience, is joined at the hip by a shared experience of colonialism, sovereignty, and globalized neoliberalism. As a result, South Asia is also a site of aspiration and struggle, as well as emancipation and exploitation. Research in business ethics has not adequately addressed the challenges faced by this region, and consequently overlooked the possibility that a fine-grained analysis of the organizational issues faced by this region can generate new insights on ethical organizations across the world. This special issue marks an important step in that direction and reveals potentially translocal insights about how ethical organizations can be reimagined.

**Keywords** South Asia · Ethical organization · Inequality · Caste · Religion · India · Afghanistan · Pakistan · Colonialism · Neoliberalism · Relationality

## Introduction

Consider the following, unrelated pieces of news:

- On the 8th of July 2021, a devastating fire broke out in a food and beverage factory on the outskirts of Dhaka, Bangladesh. 52 workers perished in the blaze, many of them trapped by an illegally locked door that cut off their escape route. Fires and industrial accidents in crowded Bangladeshi factories have become a periodic occurrence, where safety protocols are flouted in the name of securing materials from theft and controlling worker access to spaces of leisure and respite.
- Bloomberg reported on 23 November 2021 that Mukesh Ambani, richest man in Asia, who heads and runs the

\$203 billion Reliance Industries is preparing a blueprint to transfer control to his family in a way that would avoid a succession warfare of the kind he himself had with his brother. He is part of the "generation of aging tycoons across Asia [is] grappling with the transition from creating wealth to passing it on". The market value of such family empires in India is estimated at \$1.5 trillion (Bloomberg, 2021).

- In July 2020, the state of California sued Cisco Systems, alleging that senior high-caste employees of Indian origin discriminated against colleagues of Indian origin who belonged to an oppressed caste (known as untouchables or Dalits). The case opened a veritable can of worms, with many more Dalits of South Asian origin coming forward with details of horrendous discrimination they had endured in the US tech sector and elsewhere in the world.

The three vignettes we have highlighted here, while located in the South Asian context, offer a way to examine certain trans-spatial issues about organizational ethics. To be brief, we can discern a few patterns. First, they indicate that global inequalities thrive and persist in many ways in the twenty-first century, which cannot be captured only by indicators of income or wealth inequality. Second, the systems and institutions of inequality in the context of South Asia

---

✉ Hari Bapuji  
hari.bapuji@unimelb.edu.au

Fahreen Alamgir  
fahreen.alamgir@monash.edu

Raza Mir  
MirR@wpunj.edu

<sup>1</sup> Monash University, Clayton, Australia

<sup>2</sup> The University of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC 3010, Australia

<sup>3</sup> William Paterson University, Wayne, USA

are different than they are in the rest of the world. Third, the economic integration of South Asia with the developed West is now more or less complete. Finally, while capitalism is indeed a global system, its heterogeneities in different world regions present important theoretical and practical challenges for business ethics.

It is to explore such unique challenges and generate insights for imagining ethical organizations that we developed this special issue, focused on South Asia. For the purposes of this special issue, we consider South Asia as a space that comprises the eight-member nations of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and its diaspora spread around the world. South Asia provides a particularly rich context for imagining ethical organizations for several reasons, of which we highlight four below. First, in recent times, especially in the past three decades, there has been an intensification of efforts to integrate South Asia into the global economy. This has led to an increase in corporate activity, investment, and struggles that derive therefrom, relating to social justice, Indigenous Peoples, and traditional regimes of rights and property. Second, the emerging ethos of sustainable development in this region precedes the expansion of modern business. Prior to the emergence of multiple economic regimes in various nations in South Asia, the challenges of transforming societies in that region had been designated a function of the state. Third, South Asia has become a site for multiple contestations over what might have been considered "settled" issues in various theoretical spaces. For example, the modern state is defined by a particular understanding of "citizenship," either through birth or naturalization. In the recent past, several governments across the globe, including South Asian nations have sought to redefine the term to render vast communities stateless, be they refugees such as Rohingyas, migrant workers, minority communities or political dissidents. Fourth, the entire South Asian region has moved further toward a "neoliberal" model of governance, characterized by extensive privatization of public goods, reducing state appropriations on welfare in favor of market-based mechanisms, and the simultaneous increase in policing, defense spending and controlling public access to information and activist spaces. The current and ongoing pandemic has been deployed as an effective weapon for the same. Each one of these factors has significant implications for the way business is conducted, and the way in which we imagine and enact ethical organizations.

We titled the special issue, "Imagining Ethical Organizations", despite knowing that the term 'ethical organization' is a subjective assessment. Our intention was to evoke the imaginations of scholars interested in South Asia to distil the constitutive elements of 'ethical organization.' As the ethos of imagination is rooted in the ability to aspire and to transform current practices, we hoped to collectively generate

a conversation that would inform research, practice, and policy related to ethical organizations and South Asia.

Our call was met with great enthusiasm, reflected in the many submissions we received—on topics ranging from property rights to sex trafficking, from governance to philanthropy, from disability to sexual orientation, and from boards of directors to janitors. As we engaged with these papers over the last two years, we were struck by two things. First, these papers offer fresh and hitherto unexplored or underexplored perspectives on South Asia, which in turn open up new avenues for inquiry on business ethics as well as business and management in general. Second, they offer us a variety of new implications on what it means to understand and reformulate the construct of "ethical organizations". In the remainder of this essay, we elaborate on these two aspects and introduce the papers.

## South Asia: A History of the Present

To better understand our point about this special issue papers marking a departure from business ethics research focused on South Asia and more broadly our understanding of South Asia, we need to first understand the historical context of the region. Accordingly, we first begin with a brief history of the region relevant to our analysis, touching upon colonialism as well as experiments of economic development with sociopolitical and economic systems since the region gained independence from erstwhile colonizers. The institutional climate, organizations and workers in this area can be understood better in such a context.

The nations forming South Asia include Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. In 2021, the South Asian region represented 3% of the world's area, 21% of the world's population and 4.5% (US\$4.03 trillion) of the world economy.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, diaspora of South Asia—spread across the world—are estimated to be over 43 million.

It is no accident that more than one out of every five humans call South Asia home. The sub-Himalayan region is uniquely endowed from a geographic standpoint, sheltered from the Arctic by the Himalayas, watered by an extensive system of rivers, a temperate climate characterized by monsoon systems, and a civilizational history that extends for several millennia. As a consequence, the history of diverse South Asian regions is replete with a variety of cultures and sub-cultures, literatures and religions, wars and invasions, migration and displacement, exploitation and revolution, and a palimpsest of myriad economic systems.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2021/April>.

More relevant to our analysis is the experience of the region with British colonialism, which lasted two centuries from the mid-18th to the mid-twentieth century and coincided with the emergence of capitalism as the dominant mode of production across the world. South Asia became doubly disadvantaged during this period, as the British not only slowed down the establishment of institutions of mass production in the region, but also treated it as a provider of raw materials to keep European factories humming. Beginning as plantation capitalism along with wealth expropriation, the regime of British colonialism in the region eventually proceeded along a set pattern towards industrial capitalism.

The politics associated with the expansion of colonial capitalism was violent. It was also a consequence of dialectical relations between capitalists and indigenous people, who comprised mostly agrarian class, with a small but growing sector of the industrial proletariat. The demands of the growing economy led to the displacement and resettlement of labor brought from the hinterland to keep various sectors functioning. For instance, resettlement of lower caste men and women as the workforce in tea plantations, and women forming the majority of the workforce became codified under the global division of labor since the emergence of colonial capitalism in this region (Chatterjee, 2001). Hence, it is often argued that South Asian capitalism is/has been always linked with the global capitalism (Sanyal, 2007), with the ebbs and flows of global events affecting the region substantially. For example, the reverberations of the Great Depression of the 1930s as well as the two World Wars affected the South Asian economies substantially, and often catastrophically. A case in point is the Bengal famine of 1943 that decimated and destroyed the region, leading to the death of over 2 million people and producing severe malnutrition. This famine was a result of the expropriation of food grains from the region by the colonial apparatus to support the war effort in other theaters (Abdullah, 1980).

When colonialism was officially ceased, the region found itself with a geography demarcated by new state boundaries, state structures with inherited colonial institutions and norms, and underdeveloped economies, destined to play catch-up. Also, the demarcated boundaries witnessed contestation as well as redrawing. For example, 1971 saw the emergence of an independent Bangladesh, which challenged the colonial political division drawn on the basis of a religious fault line—Hindu and Muslim. Sri Lanka witnessed a civil war, with Tamilians demanding a separate country and waging war against the government. The incidences of conflict and unrest show that nation-cum-ethnicity as a category for the formation of a nation cannot assure equal rights for every group although the socio-political ideal of those independent nation-states envisaged a secular and democratic political state, with a unionized workforce and

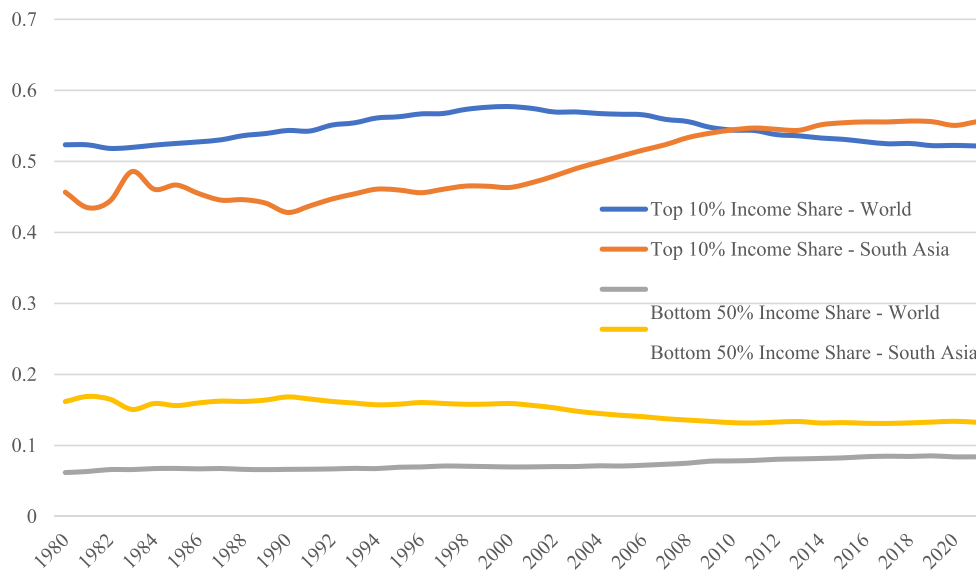
collectives of small farmers who would gain property rights to the lands they tilled through a regime of extensive land reform (Alavi, 1972).

Also, a path to catching up was not smooth, and often traversed violent paths. Subsequently, ways of living and being had to be violently transformed by the "development mandate." Indeed catching up with externally mandated benchmarks of development and adherence to metropolitan ideals necessitated political, cultural and legal reforms, often achieved by resorting to a state of crisis management and a militarized form of democracy. This in turn led to an expansion of militarized-cum-industrial and technological progress, which eventually led to a regional nuclear arms race, as well as ecological destruction from extraction in the name of mining and development. Most significantly, the expansion of military trade and business in the name of national security marked an awkward mode of ownership, which was optimistically termed the 'public-private partnership' (Sarkar, 2002).

In the economic realm, despite protestations of "modernity," elite actors found it expedient to organize the workforce along ethnic-indigenous lines. The collision of political, cultural, legal, economic, and military forces resulted in geo-political and ethnic tensions. Subsequently, violence such as genocide and armed conflicts among ethnic communities began to break out in the region, the management of which further cemented the power of elites, who presented themselves as the protectors of the nation-state against threats to national security (Drèze, 2019; Sundar, 2010). Accordingly, a variety of moral-social norms were consolidated under the code of nationality, often with an active involvement of business elites. Eventually, conflicts have now become an integral part of social-economic development in South Asia (Dreze, 2019).

Hamstrung as it was by the ever-present shadow of elite interests, state-controlled capitalism proved unequal to the task of mitigating hunger and poverty in the region. Moreover, a steady regime of indebtedness to global capital, orchestrated by international institutions such as the World Bank and IMF led to a situation where debt servicing began to constitute a significant percentage of the GDP (Toussaint & Millet, 2010). Eventually, a variety of global interests began to demand that various South Asian nations try a new, market-facing mode of organizing. The second way, with its roots in the Washington consensus, gave a predominant role to the private sector and enabled the emergence of neoliberal economic regimes. Eventually, all South Asian nations succumbed to the pulls of the second path at different moments and to different degrees in the late twentieth century.

By the mid-1990s, most South Asian nations had completed an extensive project of economic liberalization through deregulation which included, among other things, the relaxation of restrictions on foreign investment, making



**Fig. 1** Shares of Top 10% and Bottom 50% in National Income—World and South Asia. *Data Source* World Inequality Database

local currency fully convertible, reducing regulations on MNCs, scaling back protections of domestic firms, and making imports easier (Amin, 1990). Thus the neoliberal economy is characterized by how international financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF, and regulatory agencies like the WTO facilitated rapid changes in the industrial structure of these nations (Amin, 1997). For example, Bangladesh became an important hub of textile production, India consolidated its position in the global software and business process outsourcing industries, and Pakistan and Sri Lanka developed strong economic ties with China.

As a consequence of this liberalization, the GDP of South Asia began to grow at a faster rate, but such growth came at a cost. Regimes of inequality in the region became sharply exacerbated (Rama et al., 2014). For instance, this period has witnessed growing gaps between the rich and the rest, more so in South Asia than anywhere in the world. As presented in Fig. 1, data from the World Inequality Databases shows that the share of national income of the top 10% of the population of South Asia increased drastically from 42.81% in 1990 to 55.59% in 2021, whereas the global income share of the top 10% of the world population decreased marginally during the same period, i.e., from 54.35% in 1990 to 52.17% 2021. On the other hand, the income shares of the bottom 50% of South Asians reduced from 16.83% in 1990 to 13.26% in 2021; comparable figures were 6.63% and 8.4% for the world, indicating an opposite trend. Clearly, South Asians, who were relatively more equal in 1990 have caught up and gone beyond the rest of the world in a scant three decades. This reality of course is also supported by anecdotal evidence; for example, India boasts of 237 billionaires, the third highest number of any country in the world (after USA and China), while it ranks 94th out of 107 nations polled by

the Global Hunger Index 2020 (Chatterjee, 2021). A great majority of these billionaires come from the upper castes of the society—primarily Brahmins and Vysyas (Gandhi & Walton, 2012), which goes on to show how caste entrenched and strengthened economic inequalities by providing differential access to opportunities and resources based on caste (Bapuji & Chrispal, 2020). Additionally, these Indian billionaires are predominantly men who belong to the Hindu religion.

Similarly, the regime of deregulation has facilitated greater mobility and fluidity of capital, but most importantly, the mobility of people. Perhaps, this mobility has reconfigured the lives of the majority of South Asian in an even more fundamental way. The trans-spatial mobility of people driven by economic necessity has directed them to metropolitan areas, to be employed in corporate sectors, such as garment factories and in high-tech industries. It has also led people to nations across the world, whose migration pattern was two types: first, to the developed Western nations, such as US, UK, and Australia. Second, a huge number of migrant workers have been employed in the Gulf States like Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Dubai. This economic migration is different from the migration during the colonial era, which witnessed poor South Asians, predominantly of the lower castes, being shipped as indentured labor to former colonies, such as Guyana, Fiji, Mauritius, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia (Rangaswamy, 2005).

Interestingly the apparatus of transnational capitalism lacked the ethical capacity to implement social reforms that may have mitigated some fundamental, traditional cultural-structural inequalities through the axis of social relations in terms of caste, religion, and gender differences (Sen, 1999). There is no doubt that some universal social-ethical progress was realized under capitalism drawing on liberal values in the context of the North. However, under the neoliberal economic regimes, the economic needs of the population has led to a greater appetite to trans-spatial mobility that has transformed large numbers of people into economic migrants—as technocrats or as migrant workers—as subjects of the global division of labor. These new divisions have been superimposed on the preexisting divisions along the lines of gender, caste, class, religion, region, and such. Therefore, marginalized groups continue to struggle for their right to representation, dignity, equality, and self-determination—as workers—either in the apparel supply chain located in Tirupur in India, Dhaka in Bangladesh, Karachi in Pakistan, Colombo in Sri Lanka or even in Silicon Valley in the United States.

Another strand relevant for our analysis is management education and research. As the region moved from its colonial past to state-controlled capitalism and later to neoliberal capitalism, the orientation of education moved from administrative services to public enterprise management to business management, with the latter enjoying the most currency now. As such, management education was influenced heavily by the American model, supported by philanthropic organizations. For example, Ford Foundation was instrumental in stigmatizing previous pedagogical methods (Kumar et al., 2021) and setting up management institutes and instilling case method as a dominant pedagogic practice in business schools in India (Cooke & Kumar, 2020). Currently, the best-funded educational institutions throughout South Asia are business schools that offer MBAs, with curricula imported from or heavily influenced by the West. Management conferences across the globe are replete with participants from South Asia (locals or diaspora) and business journals, including *Journal of Business Ethics*, boast significant contributions from South Asians. Although arguable, we posit that the intellectual linkage of the academia in South Asia with the business school model from the West appears to be a completed project, particularly so if we exclude Nepal, Bhutan, the Maldives and Afghanistan from this discussion.

The predominance of scholars from India in the South Asian space produces peculiar problems for “South Asian Studies,” often conflating the region with India. Such focus on India took attention away from the other parts of the region, whose trajectories of development had their own particularities. Moreover, many of the Indian scholars in management academia tend to be from privileged upper-class/caste backgrounds, producing a skewed vision of the region. For instance, at the turn of the millennium, a variety of authors began to speak of “Brand India”, positioning India

as a desirable destination for global capital (e.g., Rangnekar, 2005). Corporations were exhorted to view India not only as a destination for offshoring (Zaheer et al., 2009) but also as a site of consumption, where global products could be sold (Farrell & Beinhocker, 2004). There was talk of India’s emerging middle class (estimated variously as between 100 and 200 million), and for the rest of the impoverished population, catchy terms like “bottom of the pyramid” (Prahalad, 2004) offered the hope that drops of consumption could be garnered from the poorest of citizens in India and such other emerging economies, including those in South Asia. Such optimism meant overlooking the dark side of these growing economies or their unique socioeconomic inequalities, as such examinations would dent the positive images of growth and prosperity developed around these nations, and hamper their smooth integration with the world economy. As noted earlier, the movement of people played an important part in the development of this story, to which we turn our attention to next.

In the 1960s, as the West became alarmed that it might lose its technological edge to the Soviet Union, it relaxed some of its immigration criteria to allow technically qualified labor to enter the global workforce. For example, the US adopted the Immigration Act of 1965, relaxing the quotas for the number of South Asians that would be allowed into the nation (Keely, 1979). Such mandated assistance to the mobility of workers resulted in migration of large numbers of South Asians to English-speaking nations in the West (US, UK, Australia and Canada), which was in contrast to the previous periods when foreign education was sought equally in Germany, France and Russia.

This trend is noticed too when we mark that people located in and who are migrated from those countries remain non-represented, or less represented, in academic discussion of business studies. Usually discussed immigrants of South Asians in the academic arena of business studies are those who migrated from India and Pakistan to the West or, more precisely, to the US under the Immigration Act of 1965. They were from the upper strata of the society, who had the benefit of accumulated capital—not only economic, but also social and cultural capital (Bapuji & Chrispal, 2020). These groups leveraged existing inequalities to get better deals for themselves. For example, over 90 percent of the Indians who migrated to the US were from the upper castes (whose population share is about 30 percentage) and also were relatively well-off compared to the rest in their societies (Kapur, 2010). In fact, these individuals were “triply-selected”—first, for access to education that was limited for millennia to the upper castes; second, for ability to access the limited higher education seats due to economic and social capital; third, selected by the US immigration policies for their high education and technological skills (Chakravorty et al., 2016).

Similarly, a relatively recent phenomenon also concerns the immigration of "refugees from neoliberalism," or people who were dispossessed and rendered economic refugees in their lands after the green revolution and structural adjustment policies redistributed their meager earnings upwards. For example, Mathew (2008, pp. 147–176) makes a clear link between the changes in land-holding patterns created by the Green Revolution in Pakistan and India and the larger presence of South Asian taxi drivers in Manhattan. Hence, we see how many dispossessed South Asians ended up in North America and Europe through a variety of circuits, and many among them occupy the uncertain terrain inhabited by "illegals" in those economies. And, not surprisingly, the farmers of the region are involved in the struggles against the initiatives of the corporatization of agriculture.

In sum, the colonization left South Asia severely underdeveloped, but it tried to catch-up via state-controlled capitalism first and neoliberal reforms next. The latter gave the region economic growth but also higher levels of inequality, an unprecedented domestic and international migration, and a management education that was heavily influenced by the US but pursued by the privileged from the region. Together, these had an effect on business ethics research on South Asia, as we discuss below.

## South Asia and Business Ethics Research

Despite the collision of the West and South Asia, management and business research on the region remained nearly absent till recently. For example, a topic search of Web of Science for South Asia and its constituent nations returned a total of 13,468 articles in the category of "business and management". Of these, 60 percent appeared in the last 5 years (i.e., 2017–2021) while 95 percent appeared in the last 17 years (i.e., 2005–2021). A similar pattern exists for research on business ethics focused on the region as well, with Web of Science returning 673 articles of which 52 percent appeared in the last five years and 94 percent appeared in the last 17 years. This somewhat late emergence of a focus on South Asia, despite three decades of liberalization and the migration of its people to the rest of the world is surprising.

Our examination of 59 influential business ethics articles (selected based on annual citations of five or more OR total citations of 50 or more from the set of 637 articles) reveals that a common use of South Asia was as an empirical context. For example, scholars have examined the relationship between inclusive leadership and innovative work behavior in the context of Pakistan (Javed et al., 2019). Here, Pakistan served as an empirical context for examining relationships developed by applying a theory developed in the West, i.e., leader-member exchange. Likewise, India was used as an example to show that executives with political ties engage

in and rationalize corruption (Collins et al., 2009). Another example is a study by Perry and colleagues who examined the attitudes of managers with respect to CSR in Sri Lankan garment factories (Perry et al., 2015).

In cases where a perspective from South Asia is used, it has often been deployed to incrementally explain a more context-neutral relationship. For example, using Pakistan as an empirical context, Islam and colleagues show that abusive supervision reduces knowledge sharing in workplace, but this effect is weakened if the employees exhibit a learning orientation and an Islamic work ethic (Islam, et al., 2020). Other scholars too have examined the moderating role of Islamic work ethic on the relationship between abusive supervision and knowledge hiding behaviors (Khalid et al., 2018) and counterproductive behavior (Javed et al., 2019) as well as on the direct effect of Islamic work ethic on organizational citizenship behaviors, including knowledge sharing (Murtaza et al., 2016).

It is only occasionally if not rarely, that theoretical perspectives or practices originating from South Asia are used to examine issues of ethics and sustainability by focusing on the idea or the matter of representation (Khan, 2007). Also, these papers are more recent. For example, Alamgir and Alakavuklar study the misrepresentation and non-recognition of women workers in Bangladeshi garment factories, using Amartya Sen's rights-based approach to capabilities (Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2020). Likewise, Rauf and Prasad study how food consumption practices in Tablighi Jamaat subvert the otherwise salient economic hierarchies in Pakistan (Rauf & Prasad, 2020). And, Bapuji and Chrispal offer a caste lens to define and understand economic inequality (Bapuji & Chrispal, 2020). Finally, Kumar et al. (2021) offer an Ambedkarite ethical manifesto of persuasion as a way to understand and address inequalities.

Given the scant attention paid to South Asia, predominantly from the perspective of the privileged, if not the elites, on account of caste/class/gender/religion/language, it is not surprising that the keywords of the articles returned by Web of Science show a limited presence of South Asian realities and perspectives in examining ethics. Please see Fig. 2 (first image). In contrast, the most common words in the articles in this special issue reflect the South Asian realities and perspective more; they highlight issues like caste, community, work, and the role of businesses, while also underscoring inequalities (e.g., gender, women, and disability). In other words, highlighted in this special issue are the struggles that emerged as a result of inequalities and migration and a more fundamental role of businesses in those.

It might be worth reflecting on why some of the issues highlighted by the papers in this special issue remained under-examined in the past despite the considerable scholarship on South Asia, albeit recent. While a more thorough



attention of some Western scholars early on, it was mainly to compare it with race or class—both constructs more familiar to them. Third, perhaps due to accumulated advantages over many generations, the vast majority of faculty at elite management institutions in South Asia belong to the upper castes (Joshi & Malghan, 2017). They are unlikely to have experienced or witnessed caste in the way those lower in the caste hierarchy do. Finally, any discussion on caste is dismissed by scholars as nonexistent, or an artifact of rural areas, despite the many ways in which caste influences every facet of socioeconomic action in the region. In fact, attempts to raise a scholarly discussion on caste are portrayed as anti-national and anti-Hindu, despite the caste system being not limited to one country (i.e., it is prevalent in all countries, albeit under different labels in some cases, such as *biraderi* in Pakistan) or to Hinduism (i.e., it is prevalent among all religions in the region).

We have contextualized the inadequacy of attention to realities of South Asia using the caste system for three reasons. The first is that for a mode of discrimination that is so prevalent in the entire region, caste is shockingly undertheorized (Chrsipal et al., 2021). It is perhaps the most unsettling of ideological positions that the South Asian elites are very reluctant to unpack, for it would shine a light on the manner in which entire societies are underpinned by the exploitation of lower caste labor. The second point, which is theoretically important is that the analysis of caste offers a unique entry point into the examination of labor relations and inequalities both within South Asia (Chakrabarty, 2018) and in other geographies as well (Wilkerson, 2020). Rather than simple capital-labor binaries, caste allows us to examine finer grained dialectics such as between community and capital, and allows us to recognize the many dimensions of capital—economic, social, cultural, and symbolic—that are central to value creation, appropriation, and distribution (Bapuji et al., 2020). Third, while other systems of oppression and inequality exist within the region, caste inequalities are the most stark in management research and education, with limited representation of the lower castes who constitute the vast majorities of population, e.g., nearly 70 percent in India. This exclusion, while stark, has important implications for the manner in which the South Asian region has been examined, portrayed, and understood by the caste privileged (Joshi & Malghan, 2017).

Along with caste, we can explore other subject positions as well. For instance, women and indigenous ethnic communities experience similar challenges as they are equally disadvantaged and deprived of rights and access to land and livelihoods (Agarwal, 1998). In Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the doctrinal differences between Shias and Sunnis impact the national discourses on constitutional and property rights. Moreover, as some of the above conditions change, we now see research slowly emerging on topics that

are inconvenient or cannot be explained by theories and perspectives from the West. It is for these reasons that the collective conversation of the scholarly community, via the medium of this special issue, is useful to understand what ethical organizations are.

In sum, the history of South Asia and its relationship with the West resulted in creating a somewhat skewed understanding of South Asian realities, based primarily on the perspectives of the privileged few. This resulted in silence around many issues of inequalities that predate colonialism and neoliberalism, but have exacerbated since. Yet, these issues are important to study business ethics, and more importantly, to imagine ethical organizations as the papers in this special issue underscore.

## Imagining Ethical Organizations

As presented above, the logic of the market took root in South Asia, but the concomitant institutions that accompanied capitalism in the West are either absent or weak in the region. As a result, liberal institutions such as democratic governance, social safety nets, and universal citizenship rights are situated in awkward ways in South Asia. Consequently, the construct of an ethical organization cannot be understood in a neutral domain where all participants are equal and/or have equal rights and opportunities; rather, it must be studied in a context that includes the ubiquitous presence of inequality, diversity and disparity—all of which shape the imagination itself.

Influenced by Sen, we argue that imagination is an issue of capability, and encompasses the freedom and capacity of individuals to materialize aspired changes in their defined social context (1999). While aspired changes can cover a vast array of domains, this special issue highlighted initiatives that integrate ethics and rights in South Asia and highlighted the vast inequalities. This aspiration is not limited to, as Bhatt mentions in her paper, "rules and bureaucratic processes to reduce or eliminate unethical practices within an organization." Rather, the process involves engaging with the powerful to ensure that they do not continue to impose historical injustices on the weak (Bhatt, THIS ISSUE). The effort is, as Noronha and colleagues characterize, to create courageous organizations in the face of societal hostility such that the weak can have a safe space and enjoy dignity (Noronha et al., THIS ISSUE). The ethical organizations need to recognize and visibilize the marginalized groups and members of society and organizations, rather than continuing to misrecognize and invisibilize them (Mahalingam & Selvaraj, THIS ISSUE).

By linking imagination with the capability to aspire, first we intend to visualize ethics not as a project for organizations or for business. Instead, it involves a wide range of

stakeholders, including local level research-based advocacy organizations, think tanks and local NGOs that mediate between the state and the capital (Barros & Taylor, 2018). There is considerable evidence that NGOs' involvement has brought a qualitative shift in managing governance. Their politics center on representation to ground the need for transparency and the right to recognition to bring in crucial issues that are being kept deliberately away from the public gaze and possible debate. Indeed, there has been the process of making the interrupted electoral political democratic approach accountable when social justice is to be achieved within the given framework of the state—that is, legislations enacted by the state (Dreze, 2019; Dreze & Sen, 2013). For instance, the engagement of local NGOs were directly demonstrated in the enacting of the Right to Information Act, and in organizing real changes both in instrumental and constructive ways on gender issues, and the ratification of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child to abolish all forms of violation against children and child labor. Further, their efforts were instrumental in addressing inequalities on account of gender, sexual orientation, and disability (e.g., gender equality measures, decriminalization of homosexuality, LGBTQ friendly workplace relations, and designing of spaces and practices to address disability).

Actions for socioeconomic development and business expansion are broadly adaptations of developmental programmes prescribed by the global policy regimes. The paths for development followed in the region have led to the formation of an elite nationalist class (Kumar, THIS ISSUE). Building ethical organizations is not the purview or prerogative of these or such other elites, but should include the imaginations and aspirations of those who were regarded as disqualified and rendered invisible—the subalterns such as the peasantry community and lower caste people of all dominant religions of the region (Sarkar, 2002). Although there had been different logics interwoven in the process of modernization, subalterns' struggles that organized in order to manifest their economic and cultural existence (their need for representation/ right to be recognized) is central to ethical organizations in South Asia (Kumar et al., 2021).

Rather, ethics is envisaged as a capacity which implies potentials of ethics—that can lead us how to navigate the terrain to make visible the workings, perceptions and conceptions for seeking justice as an ongoing process. Second, it is argued that in the case of area studies the general trend is to consider the given geography and its history demarcated by the state boundary as the ultimate constituent of the boundary of knowledge too (Mamdani, 2001). But, ethics calls for relational engagement in the process of knowing and thus it shows how we can relate people with space and geography, anthropologically and metaphorically, and develop an understanding regarding trans-spatial approach in offering inclusive and progressive empirical and conceptual

learnings to contribute to practical change (Nagar, 2014). Also, relationality as an approach appeals to the problem of representation and reinforces its intrinsic relevance and constructive implications to reconcile the fundamental tensions related to fragility and structural inequality, and public perceptions about the state capability, and organizational capability (Nagar, 2014). Third, the notion of ethical capacity invoked moral plurality as it makes special demands on our moral matrix in examining, critiquing and challenging interconnectedness and conflicts between what are being projected as equality, rights, and responsibility and how our individual and collective actions are organized in the unequal global economy (Gandhi, 2009). We see *imagining ethical organizations* involves the concomitant imagination of socio-cultural systems where the dispossessed and the vulnerable have access to the institutions of law and governance that undergird them.

Bringing the above discussion together, we define ethical organizations as *those that are not just focused on eliminating unethical actions within their boundaries, but engage with the powerful and collaborate with likeminded actors to courageously build inclusive spaces – within the organization and society – for the weak and vulnerable who have been misrecognized and rendered invisible due to historic and ongoing inequalities.*

## The Papers in this Special Issue

The nine papers in this special issue emphasize aspects of ethical organizations to dwell on the challenges for as well as insights from building of such organizations. They provide a valuable linkage between global *theories* and spatially grounded *stories*. Put differently, they bring together the problems and perspectives of South Asia and the West to examine the challenges of imagining and building ethical organizations. Each of these papers offers granular insight into the manner in which the South Asian region reflects many issues that are of great insight to issues that arise when modernity and neoliberal capitalism collide with historic and accumulated inequalities and aspirations of those who suffer from (and benefit from) such inequalities. The papers are introduced in an alphabetical order based on the first name of the lead author.

Arun Kumar examines the issue of corporate philanthropy and the socio-economic transformation of local communities. He discusses the idea of an ethics of modernization focussing on the role of the “modernizing elites” located in a historical analysis of India's large-scale community development program launched in the early 1950s, which was supported by global institutions such as the Ford Foundation as well as local capitalists like the Tata Group. Kumar's archival study illuminates how the production of a new moral order as a constitutive element of the modernization

of the entire society necessitates shifts in the social imaginaries of the community. Business elites, Kumar concludes, have imagined and reified conceptions of community for their own ideological purposes. Community imaginaries are shifted and transformed over time, but capitalist interests always succeed in deeming them "nationally desirable." The exclusion of women and caste oppressed populations are papered over in this discourse, in the name of the greater good.

Babita Bhatt reports on an inductive case study of a social enterprise that aims to create sustainable livelihoods for rural communities in India. Her research investigates how such enterprises deal with the ethical complexity of social change. Bhatt develops three mechanisms used by the organization to manage ethical complexity: the action of recognition, the action of reposition and the action of representation. Taken together, these three actions form a transformative process model that can help an organization become ethical. Bhatt's model goes beyond static and essentialist relationships between organizations and ethics, highlighting ethical issues at the micro level.

Bibek Bhattacharya, Ipsu Khadka and Dalhia Mani present a study of the implementation of gender quotas on Indian boards. They argue that faced with a mandate to ensure gender diversity on boards, women who were hitherto treated as different on account of gender are recategorized as similar in terms of caste and community. As a result, even though the law underscored the importance of diversity broadly, the caste and community composition of the directors remained the same despite the introduction of 1309 new women directors. The forces of caste and community homophily are so strong that even high status women directors could not overcome them, they found.

Ernesto Noronha, Nidhi S. Bisht and Premilla D'Cruz examine the manner in which sexual minorities are treated in Indian workplaces, in an effort to highlight how the ethical workplace of the twenty-first century needs to be explicitly LGBTQ friendly. The study they describe uses hermeneutic phenomenological approaches, exploring the workplace bullying experienced by lesbians and gays in two of India's biggest cities. Their participants predictably defined ethical inclusive organizations as those that contained non-discriminatory policies open to the idea of diverse sexual orientations. More significantly, and generalizing from the LGBTQ context, the authors contend that for individual organizational actors, the move from 'fear' to 'courage' is a fraught path. Courage at work is more than just an individual disposition; rather, the relevance of context to the emergence and sustenance of courage at work cannot be ignored.

Ghazal Zulfiqar begins her paper with the damning assertion that only four percent of women own land in rural Pakistan. She unpacks this statistic using the analytical tools of feminist theory, notably Joan Acker's organizational theory

of gender and class structures, and Suad Joseph's conceptualization of patriarchal connectivity to show how in rural Pakistan, valorizing kinship works to exclude women from matters pertaining to land and silences demands for their inheritances. She uses her study to analyze the political economy of social norms and the discursive mechanisms that produce land as a collective good for the sake of preserving the family's political and economic position. She also highlights the interplay between rural patriarchy and religion, and considers whether a way forward can exist for women's agency and control in patriarchal settings.

Focusing on the issue of discrimination, Ramaswami Mahalingam and Patturaja Selvaraj study janitors in Indian malls, who are subjected to caste and class oppression. They refine and bring into business studies the notion of *radical interdependence* first developed by BR Ambedkar, one of India's foremost social theorists. For Mahalingam and Selvaraj, radical interdependence comprises four interrelated processes: dialogical recognition, negating invisibilities, dignity as an embodied praxis and ordinary cosmopolitanism. They find that despite being subjected to casual and institutionalized oppression, mall janitors practice radical interdependence with varying degrees of success, preserving personal, intersubjective, and processual dignities. The paper contends that Ambedkar's idea of radical interdependence is an important organizational virtue to rethink invisibility, dignity, recognition, and ordinary cosmopolitanism in the workplace.

Roscoe Conan D'Souza and Ignasi Marti analyze the work of an anti-trafficking organization in India. Through their analysis, they shed light on the unique challenges faced by organizations that attempt to help trafficking survivors to heal in a context characterized by deeply entrenched systemic inequalities that enabled such trafficking in the first place. They theorize that care interventions can be transformational if they encourage—through mundane everyday actions—the healing, growth and sense of autonomy of the survivors. This transformation involves undoing the systemic injustices through everyday actions and interaction, and avoiding the recreation of oppressive dependence relations, they show.

Sameer Azizi's paper is located in Afghanistan, a nation with multiple area-specific governance systems. He studies the emergence of the mobile telecommunication industry in the country, which requires buy-in at the national level. Azizi's study of sub-national level imperatives in national governance demonstrates how the social contract between capitalist entities and the state, presupposed in management literature, is sometimes inadequate. His analysis contributes to a nuanced understanding of the political nature and role of business in conflict-affected contexts. Contrary to traditional institutional theory's idea of dominant businesses as 'norm-makers,' Azizi finds them to be

'governance takers,' going with whatever the political climate affords them, compromising the interests of vulnerable stakeholders in the process.

Dealing with the specific issue of business compliance of people with disabilities, Sanjukta Chowdhury-Kaul, Quamrul Alam and Manjit Singh Sandhu delineate a multilevel, cross-functional study of four Indian firms to chart the emergence of disability legislation. In an atmosphere of weak institutional enforcement, an evolving disability rights movement, and historical and colonial interpretation of disability, they find that the role of firms in mainstreaming the disability agenda has been largely an act of voluntary participation. They conclude that when firms actively engage with disability at their workplaces, they also create platforms for long-term and meaningful employee volunteering programs, generating reputation, employee satisfaction, sourcing of future talent and creating social role models.

## Conclusion

By linking imagination with freedom and bringing a spatial approach, this special issue expands/ improves our understandings regarding the intrinsic and constructive importance of recognition of existence of human life, and equality of human beings across cultures and countries. The papers in this special issue seek to underscore equality of human beings as a fundamental element to imagining and building ethical organizations. In contrast to the essentialist arguments regarding corporate social responsibility based on stakeholders' perspective, the papers in this special issue offer fundamental tensions related to our existence and our responsibility as academics—our right to interfere in directing how the moral-social economy should be managed. Therefore, going forward, our analyses must seek to combine exploration of wider affinities and linkages with firm recognition of where the constructive implications of social responsibility need to be situated so that equality can become the lynchpin of business ethics to provide a socioeconomic space where aspirations and capabilities of the marginalized are realized.

**Author Contributions** All authors FA, HB, RM contributed equally and are listed in the alphabetical order by first name.

**Funding** Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** All the authors declared that they have no conflict of interest.

**Informed Consent** Not applicable.

**Research Involving Human and Animal Rights** Not applicable.

**Open Access** This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

## References

- Abdullah, A. A. (1980). The peasant economy in transition : The rise of the rich peasant in permanently settled Bengal. *The Bangladesh Development Studies*, 8(4), 1–20.
- Agarwal, B. (1998). Disinherited peasants, disadvantaged workers: A gender perspective on land and livelihood. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(13), A2–A14.
- Alamgir, F., & Alakavuklar, N. O. (2020). Compliance codes and women worker(Mis) representation and (Non) recognition in the apparel industry of Bangladesh. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 165, 295–310.
- Alavi, H. (1972). The state in post-colonial societies: Pakistan and Bangladesh. *New Left Review*, 74, 59–80.
- Amin, S. (1990). *Maldevelopment: Anatomy of a global failure*. Zed Books Limited.
- Amin, S. (1997). *Capitalism in the age of globalization: The management of contemporary society*. Zed Books.
- Bapuji, H., & Chrispal, S. (2020). Understanding economic inequality through the lens of caste. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 162(3), 533–551.
- Bapuji, H., Ertug, G., & Shaw, J. D. (2020). Organizations and societal economic inequality: A review and way forward. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 14(1), 60–69.
- Barros, A., & Taylor, S. (2018). Think tanks, business and civil society: The ethics of promoting pro-corporate ideologies. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 162, 1–13.
- Bloomberg. (2021). Asia's richest man looks to walton family playbook on succession. Retrieved December 4, 2021 from <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2021-11-22/asia-s-richest-man-mukesh-ambani-eyes-walton-family-for-succession-plan>
- Chakrabarty, D. (1992). Provincializing Europe: Postcoloniality and the critique of history. *Cultural Studies*, 6(3), 337–357.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2018). *Rethinking working-class history*. Princeton University Press.
- Chakravorty, S., Kapur, D., & Singh, N. (2016). *The other one percent: Indians in America*. Oxford University Press.
- Chatterjee, P. (2001). *A time for tea: Women, labor, and post/colonial politics on an Indian plantation*. Duke University.

- Chatterjee, P. (2021). India's child malnutrition story worsens. *The Lancet. Child & Adolescent Health*, 5(5): 319–320.
- Chrispal, S., Bapuji, H., & Zietsma, C. (2021). Caste and organization studies: Our silence makes us complicit. *Organization Studies*, 42(9), 1501–1515.
- Collins, J. D., Uhlenbruck, K., & Rodriguez, P. (2009). Why firms engage in corruption: A top management perspective. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 87(1), 89–108.
- Cook, B., & Kumar, A. (2020). U.S. philanthropy's shaping of management education in the 20th century: Toward a periodization of history. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 19(1), 21–39.
- Dreze, J. (2019). *Sense and solidarity: Jholawala economics for everyone*. Oxford University Press.
- Dreze, J., & Sen, A. (2013). *An uncertain glory: India and its contradictions*. Princeton University Press.
- Farrell, D., & Beinhocker, E. (2004). Next big spenders: India's middle class. *BusinessWeek*, 2007, 3–7.
- Gandhi, A., & Walton, M. (2012). Where do India's billionaires get their wealth? *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47, 10–14.
- Gandhi, L. (2009). After Utopia: Notes on an ethics of newness. In H. Patrick & O. Chamsy (Eds.), *Globalization and Utopia: Critical essays* (pp. 68–81). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Islam, T., Ahmad, S., Kaleem, A., & Mahmood, K. (2020). Abusive supervision and knowledge sharing: moderating roles of Islamic work ethic and learning goal orientation. *Management Decision*, 59, 205.
- Javed, B., Fatima, T., Yasin, R. M., Jahanzeb, S., & Rawwas, M. Y. (2019). Impact of abusive supervision on deviant work behavior: The role of Islamic work ethic. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 28(2), 221–233.
- Javed, B., Naqvi, S. M. M. R., Khan, A. K., Arjoon, S., & Tayyeb, H. H. (2019). Impact of inclusive leadership on innovative work behavior: The role of psychological safety. *Journal of Management & Organization*, 25(1), 117–136.
- Joshi, S., & Malghan, D. (2017). *Missing scholars: Social Exclusion at the Indian Institutes of Management. Working Paper 554*. Bangalore: Indian Institute of Management.
- Kapur, D. (2010). *Diaspora, development, and democracy: The domestic impact of international migration from India*. Princeton University Press.
- Keely, C. B. (1979). The development of US immigration policy since 1965. *Journal of International Affairs*, 263, 249–263.
- Khalid, M., Bashir, S., Khan, A. K., & Abbas, N. (2018). When and how abusive supervision leads to knowledge hiding behaviors: An Islamic work ethics perspective. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 39, 794–806.
- Khan, R. F. (2007). Representational approaches matter. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 73, 77–89.
- Kumar, A., Bapuji, H., & Mir, R. (2021). "Educate, Agitate, Organize": Inequality and ethics in the writings of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. *Journal of Business Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-021-04770-y>, 1–14
- Mamdani, M. (2001). *When victims become killers: Colonialism, nativism, and the genocide in Rwanda*. Princeton University Press.
- Mathew, B. (2008). *Taxi! cabs and capitalism in New York City*. The New Press.
- Mir, R., Banerjee, S., & Mir, A. (2008). Hegemony and its discontents: A critical analysis of organizational knowledge transfer. *Critical Perspectives on International Business*, 4(2/3), 203–227.
- Murtaza, G., Abbas, M., Raja, U., Roques, O., Khalid, A., & Mushtaq, R. (2016). Impact of Islamic work ethics on organizational citizenship behaviors and knowledge-sharing behaviors. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 133(2), 325–333.
- Nagar, R. (2014). *Muddying the waters: Co-authoring feminisms across scholarship and activism*. University of Illinois Press.
- Perry, P., Wood, S., & Fernie, J. (2015). Corporate social responsibility in garment sourcing networks: Factory management perspectives on ethical trade in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 130(3), 737–752.
- Prahalad, C. K. (2004). *The fortune at the bottom of the pyramid*. Wharton School Publishing.
- Rama, M., Bêteille, T., Newman, J. L., & Li, Y. (2014). *Addressing inequality in South Asia*. World Bank Publications.
- Rangaswamy, P. (2005). South Asian diaspora. In M. Ember, C. R. Ember, & I. Skoggard (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of diasporas*. Springer.
- Rangnekar, S. (2005). *Realizing Brand India: The changing face of contemporary India*. Rupa.
- Rauf, A. A., & Prasad, A. (2020). Temporal spaces of egalitarianism: The ethical negation of economic inequality in an ephemeral religious organization. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 162(3), 699–718.
- Sanyal, K. (2007). *Rethinking capitalist development primitive accumulation, governmentality and post-colonial capitalism*. Routledge.
- Sarkar, S. (2002). *Beyond nationalist frames: Postmodernism, Hindu fundamentalism, history*. Indiana University Press.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Sundar, N. (2010). Vigilantism, culpability and moral dilemmas. *Critique of Anthropology*, 30(1), 113–121.
- Toussaint, E., & Millet, D. (2010). *Debt, the IMF, and the World Bank: Sixty questions, sixty answers*. NYU Press.
- Wilkerson, I. (2020). *Caste: The origins of our discontents*. Random House.
- Zaheer, S., Lamin, A., & Subramani, M. (2009). Cluster capabilities or ethnic ties? Location choice by foreign and domestic entrants in the services offshoring industry in India. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 40(6), 944–968.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.