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**ÓSCAR CARLOS FIGUEROA Y LÍA RODRÍGUEZ DE LA VEGA.**  
***INDIA EN HISPANOAMÉRICA: HISTORIA Y VARIACIONES DE***  
***UN IMAGINARIO CULTURAL*. CRIM – UNAM. 382 PP.**

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India, the world's most populous country and an economic and technological powerhouse, is arguably one of the most important nations in the world today. However, it remains woefully understudied within scholarship related to Hispanic America. Even within the turn to Asia by some Hispanists that was occasioned by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), research has focused primarily on Hispanic or Latin America's ties to the Middle East, Japan, and China. Rarely has attention been paid to India. *India en Hispanoamérica: Historia y variaciones de un imaginario cultural* is the latest, and perhaps the most comprehensive, series of studies to date that attempts to address this absence.

The volume does so in a superlative fashion while at the same time it demonstrates that there are huge voids that remain in terms of research that must be done by scholars. Among the other areas mentioned in this review, and that will be discussed later in greater depth, is the need to address cultural production that has emerged in the digital realm in the last twenty years and that are a rich testament to the contemporary connections between the two regions. The volume also opens important considerations that scholars must consider in the future when addressing this topic, namely that of the intended audience and the accessibility of the materials for Indian scholars who may not be proficient in Spanish. Finally, any discussion of India and Hispanic America should be multivocal not only in terms of the areas of specialization of the contributors, as indeed, it was, as volume co-coordinator Óscar Figueroa points out in his Introduction (13), but it should also include a more robust presence of Indian scholars working on these topics.

The Spanish-speaking population of the Americas, excluding the United States, is approximately 396 million people as of 2025, or roughly 27% of India's 1.45 billion people. The difference is substantive. But beyond that, while the Spanish-speaking Americas have more than 50 languages, including indigenous languages, creole and African languages, India, as the world's most populated country, significantly dwarfs those numbers as well, with 22 official languages and 121 other languages spoken by more than 10,000 people. Taking these massive differences into account, it is easy to see how one of the most significant

challenges for scholars is how to treat as a single entity a country that is as large and radically heterogeneous as India. Indeed, there may be said to exist not just one India but many "Indias" within the nation's borders. So where to begin, when all studies will inevitably be incomplete? This was the challenge undertaken by the two co-coordinators, Óscar Carlos Figueroa y Lía Rodríguez de la Vega in assembling the essays for this volume. It was a valiant effort to address the scarcity of scholarship on the topic to date, and they achieved exceptional results.

The thirteen essays included in the volume, as well as the Introduction, are uniformly solid. They deal primarily with the influence of India in the work of some of the region's most important intellectual and literary heavy hitters, including Mexicans Octavio Paz and José Vasconcelos, Argentines Ricardo Güiraldes, Jorge Luis Borges and Eduardo Mallea, and Cuban José Martí. The researchers are primarily based in Mexico and connected to the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, with two other contributors based in India, two in France, and one each from Chile, Argentina, and the US. One-half of these scholars took part in an event organized by the volume's co-coordinators, Óscar Carlos Figueroa and Lía Rodríguez de la Vega, and supported by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in May and June of 2023, the "Ciclo Internacional de Conferencias India e Hispanoamérica: variaciones de un imaginario." The cycle had eight two-hour sessions held each week with scholars making their presentations online.

Six contributions to this volume were at least partly based on the presentations given in 2023, which may be found online on the Docencia CRIM-UNAM YouTube channel. In the book, chapters are presented in a roughly linear fashion, starting with Taboada's, which uncovers references to India from 1770 to 1830s found in Hispanic America. The volume ends with Elsa Cross's "Por el camino de Galtá: notas sobre la huella de *El mono gramático* en la poesía mexicana" that discusses some contemporary Mexican poets. While we may elect to read the essays in the temporal sequence found in the Table of Contents, Óscar Figueroa makes it clear in the Introduction that the possibility also exists of reading the volume thematically, for example, electing to read the essays that are connected to some of the other themes that emerge in the volume, such as Buddhism, orientalism, and politics (Introduction 13-14).

All the chapters contribute to the documentation and analysis of the growing field of Indian/Hispanic American historical, cultural, and literary ties. That said, some stand out for either their importance in terms of understanding the history of the connection between the regions, such as the remarkable essay by Hernán G.H. Taboada, "El descubrimiento criollo de India (1770-1830)," or because they offer fascinating new insights into canonical material, such as Óscar Figueroa's engaging essay "Francisco Bulnes y la representación

positivista de India en el México decimonónico" on the Positivist antecedents that would set the stage for the flourishing of references to India that later abounded among Modernist authors in Spanish America. Vibha Maurya's "Atisbos de India en la obra de José Martí" essay examines the references to India made by Cuban revolutionary poet and statesman José Martí in part found in children's literature. Another fresh take on the canon is that previously mentioned by poet and researcher Elsa Cross, who, the volume's final essay, speaks to the continuing relevance of the Octavio Paz's Indian poetry for poets in Mexico.

Other superlative essays analyze new material discovered on the topic, including José Ricardo Chaves's work on the esoteric orientalism found in travel writing in the early 1900s, "La India teosófica en dos viajeros centroamericanos: María Cruz y José Basileo Acuña" based on a series of letters written by the Guatemalan and Costa Rican travelers to India who were adherents of the Theosophic Society of Madras (now known as Chennai), an organization focused on Eastern spirituality practices that was established in 1882 that served as an early point of encounter and exchange between intellectuals of the Occident and Orient. Elisa Silva's "Juan Marín, testigo privilegiado de los albores de la República India," meanwhile, discusses the writing of a Chilean diplomat stationed in the country who witnessed the nation's birth and wrote extensively on Mahatma Gandhi and different aspects of Indian culture and politics in essays published in newspapers, magazines and books primarily during the 1950s.

David Saldaña's cultural study "Vagabundos del dharma: budismo y literatura de la contracultura en México," is an essay that analyses the presence of India in the poetry of author Sergio Mondragón, his *Yo soy el otro*, from 1964, and *El aprendiz de brujo*, from 1969. The chapter, while dealing the 1960s and 70s, is particularly relevant given the current presence of India in Hispanic America, one that often takes the form of cultural, spiritual and even political practices classified under the rubric of "New Age," some of which may be found in different educational, humanitarian and spiritual organizations operating today like that of Indian guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, The Art of Living. "Vagabundos" presages that counter cultural spiritual influence of India in Hispanic America that would become salient in later decades. A fascinating essay that also references spirituality as well as yoga and meditation is that of volume co-coordinator Lía Rodríguez de la Vega, "Los viajes de Ricardo Güiraldes: representaciones de India desde Argentina," which discusses how Hispanic American intellectuals such as Güiraldes were profoundly influenced by these Indian spiritual and health-related practices more than a century ago.

The volume is ideal as a foundational text for scholars interested in moving into this relatively new area of research. Given the global importance of India, anyone working on Hispanic American literature should be required to

read it, regardless of whether they elect to pursue the research topic in the future. That said, one would hope that the volume, written in Spanish, a language not widely spoken in India, would be translated into English or Hindi to broaden the conversation to include more scholars and readers from the region. I am unaware whether the co-coordinators have planned this for the future, but not doing so will reduce the potential for greater intellectual exchanges and rich collaborations with our Indian colleagues.

To be sure, much work remains to be done by scholars on this topic. First, the discussion needs to be broadened to include not only Spanish-speaking Latin America but also the Lusophone and even Francophone or English-speaking regions of Latin America. Among other reasons, doing so would allow scholars to learn of the vast connections between India and South America's largest country, Brazil. A second area that needs to be addressed would be the dramatic changes that have occurred in terms of the connections between the regions that are the result of the explosion of the Internet and social media over the last 20 years, a time of greater contact between Latin America and India, albeit virtual, than ever before. The original title of the cycle of online lectures given online through the UNAM platform in 2023 specified that the lectures would cover the 19th and 20th centuries. However, the co-coordinators dropped that time frame from the book's title and works published in the last two decades are included in the final chapter. The omission of the original timeframe used for the lecture cycle may explain why the volume does not have a greater presence of these sorts of contemporary cultural manifestations.

Finally, one would hope that in the future, in volumes like *India en Hispanoamérica: Historia y variaciones de un imaginario cultural* there will be a far greater representation of scholars from India (and from cities beyond the country's capital of Delhi). Similarly, more equitable representation from scholars beyond the traditional powerhouses of the Spanish-speaking Americas of Mexico, Argentina and Chile is long overdue. While this book, as a foundational text, is essential for scholars to learn of the historical antecedents to this relationship and to see how those connections may be seen in the work of primarily male canonical writers, far more scholarship on this topic is necessary.

While the presence of India within the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking world, in terms of the number of inhabitants, is relatively minimal, in terms of those from India that populate the region, the presence of Indian culture in Latin/o America most often takes the form of culture--meditation and yoga groups and centers, or in organizations dedicated to the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. For this reason, David Saldaña's "Vagabundos del dharma: budismo y literatura de la contracultura en México," though it deals with the 1960s and 1970s, is particularly relevant. The Spanish-speaking world has a greater

presence in India, but again, it is not the result of the many inhabitants from Latin America that populate the region; instead, it may be primarily seen in Indians' interest in Latin and Latino-American dance and music, a topic not mentioned in the volume. This interest has made its way into Indian film, television, music, and digital culture over the last 20 years and remains an area almost entirely unexamined by Hispanists.

An additional absence seen in the volume relates to the presence of women writers and intellectuals. The only essay including a women writer, the Central American travel writer María Cruz, is found José Ricardo Chaves's excellent essay "La India teosófica en dos viajeros centroamericanos: María Cruz y José Basileo Acuña." The chapter analyses thirteen letters written in French to her friend in Paris by the Guatemalan writer between 1912 and 1913, letters that were published as *Lettres de l'Inde 1912-1914* in 1915. Other contributors do not mention, or barely mention, important women from Hispanic America that have connections to India, such as Chilean Nobel Prize for Literature winner Gabriela Mistral, whose poetry was exceptionally popular in the Asian country and was translated into many different languages spoken there beyond English and Hindi, including Tamil and Malayalam. Argentine intellectual heavyweight and essayist Victoria Ocampo, the founding editor of the journal *Sur*, who, although she never went to India, wrote numerous essays that included Indian philosophy, spirituality, and culture, in large part influenced by her almost two months spent in daily contact and conversations with Indian Nobel Prize for Literature recipient Rabindranath Tagore in 1924. Ocampo is referenced only briefly Sonia Betancort's "Un *sensorium* transpacífico: Güiraldes, Tagore y el peso de la modernidad" (219). Opening up the discussion of Spanish America to include Portuguese-speaking Brazil would mean being able to include one of the country's most celebrated authors of the last century, Cecília Meireles, who traveled to India in 1953 and wrote a collection *Poemas escritos na India* in 1962, or award-winning contemporary Brazilian writer Adriana Lisboa, whose book of poetry from 2019, *Equator*, was also published in India and serves as a bridge between the two countries.

Looking beyond gender, incorporating Brazil into a broader conceptualization would also mean discussing the indirect presence of India that is seen in the work of other important Brazilian authors, such as bestselling author Paulo Coelho, or even including studies related to Portugal's Luis Vaz de Camões, whose epic poem from 1572 *Os Lusíadas*, references navigator Vasco De Gama's 1498 trip in which he traveled to Calcut, also known as Kozhikode, a city in Kerala along the Malabar coast in Southern India. *Os lusíadas* was popular not only in Brazil, but translated into Spanish in 1659 by Miguel de Farias, an important fact that is mentioned by Taboada in his outstanding opening chapter of the volume, "El descubrimiento criollo de India (1770-



1830)" (22). It is worth noting that Brazil is the country in Latin America with the largest population of Indian origin, numbering 27,000, far more than that of Mexico and Argentina combined.

Perhaps most importantly, as mentioned above, it is essential to incorporate greater representation of our Indian scholars working on Latin American topics, not only those of other researchers working at other universities within Delhi beyond the University of Delhi, the academic homes of the only two Indian contributors to this volume, but also Jawaharlal Nehru University, that has one of the oldest programs in the country in the field of Latin American Studies and Spanish. Beyond that, many important universities outside of India's capital have scholars working on this topic, such as researchers affiliated with programs in the Centre for Latin American Studies at the University of Kerala and at the Centre for Latin American Studies at the University of Goa. Jadavpur University in Kolkata has the Centre for Studies in Latin American Literature and Culture (CSLALC), and Hyderabad is home to the prestigious English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) with the Department of Hispanic and Italian Studies.

Another important consideration for future studies on India and Hispanic or Latin America is to incorporate the Indian diaspora, the largest in the world, comprising some 35.4 million people, many of whom live in the Americas, primarily in the US, where there are 5.2 to 5.4 million residents or citizens of Indian origin, and in Canada, where there are 1.8-2.9 million, a number which far dwarfs that of the number of Indian inhabitants in the rest of the Americas. In Latin America and the Caribbean, it is Mexico, Columbia, Cuba, El Salvador, Dominican Republic and Brazil as well as Surinam, Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago in the Caribbean that have are the highest populations of Indian origin.<sup>1</sup>

Conceptualizing these connections vis, a vis the Western Hemisphere and the Indian diaspora would enable scholars to include an examination of any regional references found in the work of the second Nobel laureate of Indian origin after Rabindranath Tagore, V.S. Naipaul, who won the award in 2001 and who hails from the tiny Caribbean country of Trinidad. Finally, looking at the broader diaspora could also open the field by examining the Luso-Hispanic references found in other important contemporary Indian writers of Indian descent, such as Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desi, Aravind Adage, Salman Rushdie or Jhumpa Lahiri.

A final consideration relates to the need to address the significant interaction between Latin America and India due to the Internet and social

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<sup>1</sup> *Indian Migrants in the Global South in the Americas: The Caribbean, Central and South America*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

media over the last 20 years. The digital interconnections and the resulting cultural manifestations that incorporate both regions are fascinating, plentiful, and easily found online. The Indian covers-- using traditional Indian instruments of Indian classical music--of global hits of Spanish pop music, for example, or videos that show common Indian dance forms, such as bhangra, performed to Latin pop songs, have had astronomically high numbers of viewers around the world. Just one example would be the myriad Indian dance and music versions that may be found online of the massive global hit from 2017 by Puerto Rican singer Luis Fonsi and featuring rapper Daddy Yankee, "Despacito" (one example may be seen here, a video by four Indian Sikhs in the Panjab who call themselves the "Bhangra Panthers"): <https://youtu.be/lZqrFfEzfII?si=GZRwuMw1NINerWep>).

These India-Latin/o America examples of cultural fusion have been seen millions of times around the world, as one can ascertain in part due to the number of different languages represented in the comments. Both the videos themselves and the comments provided by viewers provide a veritable treasure trove for scholars looking to examine connections between the two regions. Scholarly attention to popular culture in the digital realm is essential. It is worth noting that Óscar Figueroa mentions the possibility of undertaking such studies in his Introduction, listing it as one of the "tareas pendientes" (18). As scholars, we must not ignore how our field has gone beyond traditional books and journals and moved into the digital realm.

The essays of *India en Hispanoamérica: Historia y variaciones de un imaginario cultural* provide an essential point of departure for scholars who are considering working on the topic of the rich and largely unexplored cultural connections between India and Hispanic America. The volume fills, in part, what has been a substantive gap in the East-West studies of the last twenty years, namely that of the inclusion of India, and provides a solid foundation for current and future scholars. At the same time, the volume reminds readers just how much remains to be done in terms of scholarship, and in doing so, hopefully it will challenge them to pursue this exciting new area of research.







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