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Modern Achievers: Role Models in South Asia

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# Introduction. Modelling Exemplarity in South Asia

Laurent Gayer and Ingrid Therwath

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- 1 In 2007, Prashant Tamang, a young Indian police officer of Nepalese origin, became the winner of the third edition of the television show 'Indian Idol'. This victory was made possible by the mobilization of Tamang's profession—the Indian Police force—and of his ethnic community—Indians of Nepalese descent—both in India and abroad. The young man had captured the imagination of these two groups with his musical talent but also with his life-story and personality. Born and educated in Darjeeling, Tamang had joined the police force to support his family after his father's demise, and it is in the Calcutta police orchestra that he perfected his musical gift. Along with Tamang's family values and self-made-man-ship (he never received any formal musical education), his supporters seem to have appreciated that '[Tamang] thinks of himself as a simple person, with simple thoughts and simple living'.<sup>1</sup> Although role models can also, like saints, derive their appeal from their exceptionality, Prashant Tamang's fans looked up at him as a role model for his simplicity, as suggested by the following comments, which were posted on an Internet forum discussing the results of the show:

I admit Amit's the better singer but being an idol isnt just abt great singing. It's also about being a role model for others and Prashant is a great one coz he's so humble n down to earth! Besides, Prashant didnt have any formal training to begin with so stop dishing his voice. U have to touch the hearts of people n Prashant has done tat to millions of people with his nature n also attitude!<sup>2</sup>

- 2 The modelling of Prashant Tamang as an exemplary figure by his supporters, with the support of the Indian audiovisual industry, epitomizes many of the themes developed in this issue of SAMAJ. Like many of the candidates to exemplarity discussed in this issue, Tamang was imagined by his fans and promoters as a 'person of accomplishment' (Mines 1994: 16), and more specifically as a virtuous self-made man with strong family values. As many contributions to this issue suggest, this conjunction of inherited virtues and personal achievement, combining an 'ontological conception of value' with the 'logic of the proof' (Albert 1999: 19), is one of the distinguishing trends of contemporary politics of

exemplarity in South Asia. And although inherited elements have not disappeared from South Asian definitions of exemplarity, ontological signs of distinction such as belonging to a 'good family' seem to be gradually losing hold over these definitions. Another particularity of exemplarity in South Asia, also revealed in Prashant Tamang's success story, is the socially circumscribed appeal of the region's new role models, compared to the more universal resonance of heroes of the past. It is these transformations currently taking place within the politics of exemplarity in South Asia that this issue of SAMAJ aims to uncover.

- 3 The role of literature, cinema, and the press in shaping a public sphere along with a national sentiment has generated many in-depth studies, many of which drew their inspiration from the works of Jurgen Habermas (1989) and Benedict Anderson (1983). However, the engineering and promotion of exemplary figures, whether by the state or by other agents, has not received the same attention from social scientists. This is particularly true for South Asia, where the production, diffusion and reception of role models remains understudied as compared to other regions of the world, Afghanistan being a notable exception in this regard (Centlivres 2001, Centlivres & Centlivres-Demont 2002). In West African contexts, for instance, Jean-Pierre Warnier and Richard Banégas (2001) have uncovered the processes at work in the manufacturing and marketing of modern achievers, but to date there exists no such study as far as South Asia is concerned.
- 4 Most contributions on the subject of exemplarity, heroes and role models, written in the last fifteen years, have come from the ethnology of oral literatures, from education sciences or from cultural history, with a few recent additions from social and religious anthropology (Centlivres *et al.* 1998, Centlivres 2001, Mayeur-Jaouen 2002). These studies generally focus on folklore characters or national heroes, and on the behavioural changes that these inspiring figures can bring about in teenagers, particularly through history textbooks (*e.g.* Amalvi 1998). Political scientists and sociologists have shown less concern for the subject in the past thirty years. Not surprisingly, most of the political science and sociology works on this issue were conducted between 1945 and 1970, at the height of the Cold War, when the war between the liberal and the communist camps was also being fought *via* heroes in popular culture (see for example Mary Sheridan's (1968) article on heroes and the political engineering of exemplarity in Maoist China). From the 1970s to the 1990s, only a few authors strove to understand the politics of exemplarity. Since then, the end of the Cold War, the advent of global consumption and communication and a triumphant neo-liberal agenda coexisting with ethnic, religious and local dissent have shed a new light on exemplarity as a vehicle for ideology and politics. This issue of SAMAJ wishes to address this multifaceted phenomenon by using a variety of approaches and disciplines ranging from political science to sociology, anthropology and cultural studies, with a great emphasis on fieldwork and on the constructions and representations of exemplarity.

## Heroes, martyrs, role models

- 5 For the sake of clarity, we will distinguish here between three ideal-types of exemplary figures: the hero, the martyr and the role model (the saint could have been added to this triad, but none of the contributions to this issue focuses specifically on such classical figures of exemplarity). The etymology of the word 'hero' goes back to classical Greek

*heros* for half-god and defender, or protector. In the Homeric period, a hero was a warrior-chieftain of extraordinary strength and often divine ascendance (Bailly 1990). The English term ‘martyr’—derived from the Greek *marturos*—as well as its Arabic equivalent *shahid*, which has been imported in all major South Asian languages (Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Nepali...), are both related to the act of witnessing. Both in the Christian and Islamic tradition, the martyr is etymologically he or she who proclaims his/her faith by willingly submitting to death (Khosrokhavar 2003: 22).<sup>3</sup> As Marie-Lecomte Tilouine shows in her contribution to this issue on the ‘living martyrs’ of the Nepalese People’s War (1996-2006), this imported rhetoric of martyrdom (*shahadat*) can also accommodate vernacular idioms of sacrifice, such as the Hindu notion of blood sacrifice (*bali dan*).

- 6 Heroes, martyrs and saints are transcendental figures of exemplarity (Albert 2001: 19), endowed with supernatural faculties while embodying supra-human values. The major difference between the hero and the martyr is of a strategic nature: the former is generally victorious over his foes whereas the latter has to be put to death to deliver his message. It would thus seem that martyrs must meet with a tactical defeat to triumph on the long run. In other words, martyrs would be tragic figures, whereas heroes would belong to a more epic or dramatic register (Zins 2003: 318). However, this assertion needs to be qualified. In the case of *jihadis*, for instance, death may signal a worldly defeat in the face of the oppressor but it also amounts to a victory in the eyes of God, seen as the ultimate arbiter of human struggles. And in her contribution to this issue, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine shows how Nepalese Maoists have conflated the figure of the hero and that of the martyr, with the latter literally absorbing the former as the Maoist notion of ‘*bir shahid*’ (hero-martyr) suggests.
- 7 However distinct the nature and sources of their exemplarity may be, heroes, saints and martyrs share their exceptionality. Their vocation is to inspire by virtue of their exceptional deeds, not to be emulated by society at large. Their power is conditioned to their rarity and to their distinctive, supra-human qualities, which locates them in a liminal space between the human and the divine. These three classical types of exemplary figures are aristocratic in nature,<sup>4</sup> although martyrdom has undoubtedly been democratized in recent times, within the Muslim world (Devji 2005) and beyond (Pettigrew 1997). In fact, the very notion of exemplarity has an aristocratic connotation, at least etymologically: in Rome, the *exempla* were edifying anecdotes which involved famous personalities and were meticulously archived by aristocratic lineages (*gens*) (Tourret 2007: 26). It is this aristocratic conception of exemplarity which is presently being challenged in South Asia, through the emergence of more mundane and plebeian role models.
- 8 The expression ‘role models’ appeared as recently as the late 1950s (Merton 1957). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a role model is ‘a person looked to by others as an example in a particular role.’ Unlike classical figures of exemplarity, role models and ‘great men’ are fully human characters, embodying more profane and immanent values. They stand apart from classical heroes, ‘because their exemplarity is not limited to their expertise in martial arts but extends to all the domains benefiting society’ (Enders 2002: 40). Drawing inspiration from Marat, Mona Ozouf (1984: 144) identifies six different types of ‘great men’: the philosopher, the lawmaker, the magistrate, the orator, the trader and the warrior. This typology echoes Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot’s (1991) more elaborate analytical model, which suggests that in contemporary Western societies (and more specifically France), ‘greatness’ comes to be proclaimed, measured or

denied according to six different ‘orders of greatness’, each of which relies upon a distinct conception of the common good. These six ‘orders of greatness’ and the specific political philosophies which inform them (or ‘*cités*’, to use the authors’ term) are the ‘inspired *cit *’, the ‘domestic *cit *’, the ‘*cit * of opinion’, the ‘civic *cit *’, the ‘mercantile *cit *’, the ‘industrial *cit *’ and the ‘*cit * by projects.’ The authors’ skepticism about the possibility of extending this model to highly hierarchical societies (like India), which they claim do not adhere to the idea of a ‘common humanity’, is proven wrong by the South Asia context. In his study of a contemporary Indian Muslim entrepreneur’s autobiography, Laurent Gayer shows that Boltanski and Th venot’s model can indeed be put into conversation with current changes taking place in India’s own ‘economy of greatness’ in a context of political democratization and economic liberalization (see Gayer in this volume).

- 9 Compared to classical figures of exemplarity such as heroes, saints and martyrs, great men and role models show travails which bring them closer to the hurdles of everyday human life. As such, they are easier to emulate and pertain to a distinctive moral landscape, more attuned to democratic and disenchanting, post-magical times. Whereas heroes and martyrs provide a road-map to the ‘good death’ (the *kalos thanatos* of classical Greece), role models propose guidelines for a good life. Benjamin Franklin’s (2007: 72) list of thirteen virtues extolled in his *Autobiography* in the ‘hope that some of [his] descendants may follow the example and reap the benefit’ are a classical illustration of this specificity. Whereas heroes are generally imposed from above, by the State, role models are more prone to emerge from below, through the choices of the populations (Enders 2002: 46), making them a particularly interesting subject for cultural studies and other disciplines concerned with the reception of cultural artefacts. Role models are half moral entrepreneurs, half moral commodities, whose exemplarity proves more ‘volatile’ than that of heroes of the past (Enders 2002: 46), and more consistent with the rise of individualism, capitalism and democratic institutions. Unlike heroes and martyrs, they do not need to kill or die to prove their point. Exemplarity, here, can be understood in a more statistical sense: role models are more banal and as such more representative of their society than heroes and martyrs, whose evocative power derives from the fact of being distinct from other mortals. Here lies the great paradox of modern politics of exemplarity: because they are more imperfect than heroes of the past and have been deprived of the support of invisible forces, role models seem to have a greater ability to lead by virtue of their ordinariness.
- 10 In practice, the appeal of these increasingly self-proclaimed role models remains limited. While heroes, in spite of being products of specific cultures appeal through their universal exemplarity, role models are necessarily context-dependant and meant to serve a particular purpose. They are more ephemeral than heroes and more functional too. Thus, Malvika Maheshwari’s study of perpetrators of attacks against artists in India very aptly differentiates heroes from role models (see Maheshwari in this volume). The men she interviewed do not wish to—and for that matter could not—project themselves as national heroes. Aware of their own limitations, these iconoclasts rarely mobilize the idea of the nation and have to content themselves with being ‘characters of momentary veneration [rather] than holders of real power’. Nichola Khan reaches the same conclusion in her study of political killers in Karachi, who failed to gain durable and universal respect within their own community (Khan 2010: 60).
- 11 Over the centuries, South Asian vernacular languages and literatures have produced rich, complex idioms of exemplarity. Sanskrit has almost two hundred words meaning hero,

some of them close to the Greek *heros* and some closer to what we now understand as role models. For instance, an *atipurusha*, a first-rate man, an *ekavira*, a unique man, and a *nayaka*, a leader, are understood as heroes, while an *upanayaka* is a secondary hero and *pravira*, a super-hero. On the derogatory side, a number of substantives like *kshemashura*, *gehekshvedin*, *gehevijitin*, or *geheshura*, assign negative qualities to ‘house-heroes’ as boasters or cowards, while specific terms exist to lampoon individuals affecting heroism. Different words also exist according to the nature of heroism, be it physical courage, moral strength, compassion, financial generosity, fertility, etc. This polysemy, which was passed on to most South Asian languages, from Hindi to Nepali and Telugu, illustrates the importance of exemplarity in the region and the vast vocabulary available to differentiate between heroes, role models and achievers (Monier-Williams 2008). Urdu also possesses a large choice of terms to signify heroism. Like in Greek or Sanskrit, moral qualities and bravery on the battlefield are key elements in the Urdu definition of heroes. Terms such as *surma* and *bahadur* (hero/brave man), as well as *abtal parasti* (hero worship, derived from Arabic), refer to brave warriors, whereas *sar bar avurdah* (derived from Persian) is more specific to individuals of exceptional intellectual merit.

- 12 In Europe, ‘the fabrication and promotion of heroes has been attuned to the rhythm of nation-building’ (Centlivres *et al.* 1998: 5). In South Asia too, the politics of exemplarity has been linked to nation-building and nationalism, but not only. The notion of *Pro Patria Mori*, so central to European political history (Kantorowicz 1951), did not, for example, resonate with the same intensity in South Asia. Here, State narratives of exemplarity, like the mythologies surrounding freedom-fighters and nation-builders such as Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah or Ambedkar, coexist and sometimes enter in conflict with exemplarity based on sub-national affiliations like caste, sect and lineage. In this context, the production of exemplarity has not solely taken place within the realm of the Nation-State, which helps to explain the heterogeneity and even the contradictions of contemporary politics of exemplarity in South Asia. This ‘polytheism of values’ and the ‘pluralization of pantheons’ which it induces (Albert 1998: 27) are vividly illustrated by the contributions to this issue of SAMAJ. Significantly, none of these contributions focuses on public figures, but rather concentrate on successful economic or religious entrepreneurs, materially and morally sound migrants, political dissidents or iconic gendered figures. The overview of politics of exemplarity in South Asia provided by these contributions is at best exploratory and does not claim to exhaust the subject. Nonetheless, it attests of the vitality of South Asian societies in modelling new figures of exemplarity, providing individuals and groups with a moral compass for their ‘social navigation’ (Vigh 2006).

## Contemporary ‘wars of morality’ and the production of exemplarity in South Asia

- 13 The structural transformations which have been taking place in South Asian economies in the last decades have been accompanied by new representations of success and achievement. This is particularly visible in India, where the economic reforms that started in the early 1990s have led to the glorification of materialism, the private sector and technology (if not necessarily to their pursuit, see Jeffrey 2010). The prestige of the civil service was transferred to the private sector, made more attractive by the economic liberalization of the 1990s—particularly to the upper castes who felt increasingly barred

from the public sector by caste-based quotas after the partial implementation of the Mandal report in 1989 and who started voting less, generally withdrawing from the public political sphere.

- 14 At the same time, the rise of ethno-nationalism, caste-based politics and politico-religious militancy has also generated alternative discourses and exemplary figures throughout South Asia. The media, and in particular the printed press, television and electronic media have played a major part in forging role models and labelling heroes or villains. In 2008, the media coverage of the terror attacks in Mumbai has put a great emphasis on the sacrifice of two members of the security establishment, Major Sandeep Unnikrishnan and the Mumbai Anti-Terrorist Squad chief Hemant Karkare, often presented by the media and by politicians as '*deshbhakti*' (patriots, literally country-worshippers) and '*shahid*' (martyrs).<sup>5</sup> Karkare's case in particular stands out, as he had been at the receiving end of the Sangh Parivar's ire for his enquiry into cases of Hindu terrorism. With his untimely death, he paradoxically became a role model for those who had waged a defamation campaign against him. Irom Sharmila, a Meitei from Manipur, whose fast unto death and subsequent imprisonment catapulted her nationally and internationally to the status of living-martyr and symbol of indigenous resistance against an oppressive State, is another example of exemplarity as a site of contestation.
- 15 In the case of Pakistan, the military establishment has redefined the category of the '*shahid*' in the context of the country's contribution to the 'war on terror': *jihadi* militants, when killed by the Pakistani military on Pakistani soil, are no longer projected as 'martyrs', a title which is presently reserved by the state to its official agents killed in the line of duty. Martyrs do not exert a monopoly over the production of exemplarity though. Even in deeply militarized societies such as Pakistan, non-violent personalities have acquired the status of 'great men' or role models, be they politicians like Abdul Gaffar Khan in the 1940s (known as the 'Frontier Gandhi', Khan led the non-violent movement of the Khudai Khidmatgar, better known as the 'red shirts'), or more recently social workers (Abdul Sathar Edhi), judges (Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry) or simple individuals struggling against injustice (such as Mukhtar Mai, a young and uneducated Punjabi woman who has been fighting sexual violence against women, after being subjected to a gang rape). These non-violent role models have been no less controversial than their more aggressive counterparts in the region: Abdul Gaffar Khan spent a great deal of the 1960s and 1970s in prison or in exile for his alleged collusion with India; Edhi is detested by many politicians in Karachi; Chaudhry was denigrated even by those who claimed to defend him (Gayer 2009); Mukhtar Mai, for her part, was denied the permission to travel outside Pakistan by General Musharraf, who considered that she gave a 'bad name' to the country.
- 16 These examples highlight the existence of competing role models and 'wars of moralities' (Banégas & Warnier 2001) to determine what and who should be deemed exemplary. The highly competitive nature of this 'market of saviours and exceptional beings' (Centlivres & Losonczy 2001: 11) invites us to explore the boundaries of acceptability (what makes a character a controversial figure at a certain time, and a more suitable one at another) and the engineering of role models in the very distinct contexts of production and reception. In the latter, the ambivalence of heroes and role models needs to be emphasized: even the most revered exemplary figures, such as the *javanmard* (the 'man of integrity') in Iran, are objects of perplexity for their exceptionality and unpredictability. So much so that the *javanmard*, like many other exemplary figures, 'sits at the interface between conformism



—for he embodies the values of society—and anti-conformism—since his interpretation of these values is somehow extreme’ (Adelkhah 2006: 71).

- 17 The competitive and ambivalent politics of role modelling must be historicized: the ‘moral lessons’ (Enders 2002: 43) given by heroes and role models are value-laden commentaries on a specific social configuration in a given moment of time. Thus, although some case-studies discussed in this issue do not focus on material ostentation, as in the case of the Maoist fighters in Nepal, others give pride of place to a *nouveau riche* ethos of wealth accumulation and display which cannot be seen in isolation from the economic reforms undertaken by most countries of the region during the 1990s, and from the high rates of growth and the subsequent increase in middle class numbers experienced by these countries in the following decade. While this may not be a regional specificity (Banégas & Warnier 2001), it surely is a recent evolution that only goes back to a couple of decades.
- 18 Throughout this issue, the authors point out the modern nature of heroes and role models in South Asia, with a greater emphasis on role models than on heroes. Role models are indeed easier to promote, self-promote and emulate. A number of the achievers presented in this issue, like the Hindu nationalist or Muslim censors studied by Malvika Maheshwari, as well as the real estate developer Abul Fazl Farooqi, studied here by Laurent Gayer, advertise their own exemplarity and claims to moral superiority through self-produced narratives. Abul Fazl Farooqi’s autobiography, *Nasheb-o-Faraz*, is a modern text in disguise, which borrows from traditional Persianate rhetoric yet seeks to reconcile private moral virtue with material success in an unconventional way. It is worth noting that the more exemplarity is auto-produced, the less universal legitimacy it can claim to, as the new role models and achievers target a very particular audience, as is the case of Dr. Farhat Hashmi, studied here by Faiza Mushtaq. In doing so, they also invite criticism and border onto self-justification.
- 19 As Fariba Adelkhah suggests in her study of social and political change in post-revolutionary Iran, ‘being modern, in Iran or in any other society, is to reinvent one’s difference’ (Adelkhah 2006: 11).<sup>6</sup> This is exemplified, here, by the *Amar Chitra Katha* mythological comics studied by Nandini Chandra. Through a medium of recent importation,<sup>7</sup> the prowess and sacrifices of past or mythical figures were ‘updated’ and ‘reified’ for contemporary audiences (Chandra 2008: 4). The mythological character of Shakuntala, for example, was deprived by ACK authors of its sexual and political ambiguity, to be projected as an ideal-wife according to the moral canons of India’s new middle classes. In a state like Uttar Pradesh, this is also exemplified by the Bahujan Samaj Party’s ‘icon-based politics’, which aims to provide Dalits with a new sense of dignity and a new fighting spirit through the promotion of heroic figures of the past, and in particular of Dalit ‘heroines’ (*virangana*) (Narayan 2006). In Nepal, as shown by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, Maoist insurgents have both subverted and drawn inspiration from classical Hindu conceptions of warfare, in order to promote their own narratives of war and martyrdom (see her contribution to this issue and Lecomte-Tilouine 2009). Along with such localized, subaltern and dissident heroes and role models, even the most enduring and nationalized exemplary figures of South Asia, be they religious or secular, are in a state of flux, enmeshed in a web of significations that change across time, space, class, or caste.



## Values to emulate: South Asian role models between dissent and conservatism

- 20 This issue of SAMAJ reveals how contemporary politics of exemplarity in South Asia, in addition to having new sites of production, almost systematically carries a material, if not materialistic dimension. The role models examined in the various articles, whether they are religious, politically dissident or cultural figures, are often shown as entrepreneurs whose exemplarity is attested by their financial success. The heralding of rich Anglo-Saxon NRIs on screen as role models paving the way for indigenous brand consumption since the 1990s, studied here by Ingrid Therwath, is a case in point. However, as Laurent Gayer shows in his study of Abul Fazl Farooqi's autobiography, this sanctification of economic achievements is not systematically associated with the conspicuous forms of consumption and leisurely lifestyles associated with materialism. On the contrary, Farooqi's self-production of exemplarity suggests that worldly asceticism constitutes a possible alternative to ostentatious *nouveau riche* lifestyles for South Asian aspirants to the status of model achievers.
- 21 The praise of material success and/or materialism sung by contemporary role models in South Asia is often concomitant with social conservatism, with a particular emphasis on gender relations as emphasized by Nandini Chandra's, Ingrid Therwath's, Malvika Maheshwari's and Faiza Mushtaq's contributions. The very nature of heroes and role models lies in their use as tools for the reinforcement of a certain social order, sometimes after a crisis or through momentary transgression. In contemporary South Asia however, they seem to serve two opposite agendas. On the one hand, a variety of role models, whether self-proclaimed or not, posit themselves or are posited as champions of both capitalist modernity and cultural neo-traditionalism. On the other hand, a perhaps less visible but equally potent category of role models advocate dissent and contestation. Through the imagery and rhetoric of martyrdom, they enable marginalized, oppressed and subaltern figures to enter the mainstream media and debate. While the former set of role models try to reconcile moral uplifting with material success, the latter is inscribed in a more classical and heroic tradition of honour gained on the battlefield, and/or through selflessness and sacrifice. In between these two poles of exemplarity—one aiming at the reproduction of supposedly traditional moralities and the other at their subversion — lies a third, more hybrid configuration, exemplified here by Faiza Mushtaq's contribution. If Farhat Hashmi, the founder and leader of the Pakistani Islamic women's movement of Al-Huda, is such a 'controversial role model', it is because she challenges simultaneously traditional religious authorities and liberal-secular elites with her emphasis on female assertion through Islamic education. Between the neo-traditionalist and revolutionary role models covered in this issue, Farhat Hashmi occupies an intermediary position—that of a moralist reformist, challenging gender conventions and political configurations from within the Islamic tradition.
- 22 Despite their differences of production and agenda, these three types of role models inform us on the meaning of achievement and success in contemporary South Asia and illustrate the pangs of societies coming to terms with modernity and mass consumption as well as with statehood and redistribution.
- 23 Heroes, martyrs, saints and role models certainly provide political and moral entrepreneurs with powerful tools of mobilization and identification. Through an

'ancestry effect' (Albert 2001: 20), they inscribe a given community into a shared history and moral landscape, thus reinforcing its sense of pride and solidarity. In other words, the fabrication of exemplarity paves the way for political 'manipulations' (Centlivres & Losonczy 2001: 11). Yet, functionalist perspectives on the politics of exemplarity fall a bit short. All figures of exemplarity may well be social or political artefacts. But this is not to say that they are exclusively produced by manipulative elites with vested interests. Exemplarity resonates differently within different groups and it is coproduced by the audience (or the adepts) of exemplary figures, who always have their word to say about the exceptionality of their models. Moreover, exemplarity is not a given, fixed attribute: it is continuously renegotiated between adepts, political or moral entrepreneurs, and society at large. As a consequence, the nature of a specific character's exemplarity may undergo profound transformations across time and social space. Finally, the outcome of politics of exemplarity is unpredictable, once it is endorsed socially and incorporated into specific regimes of 'subjectivation'. Following Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, we understand this notion as the historically situated process through which groups and individuals strive to construct themselves as moral subjects in front of power (Foucault 1976, 1984, Butler 1997). What matters, here, is not so much the result of this process (subjectivity, identity...) but rather the process itself (Bayart 2004). What this literature suggests is that subjection, rather than agency, is the condition for the emergence of the political subject. However, as several empirically grounded studies recently demonstrated (e.g. Mahmood 2005), subjection is only the beginning and certainly not the end of the story. Thus, in the case of Egyptian women involved into the Islamic revival movement, Saba Mahmood shows that these women's subordination to Islamic values apparently detrimental to their 'agency' has actually reinforced their capacity for action (Mahmood 2005). The same trends can be observed in South Asia, as several contributions to this issue demonstrate. The Nepalese Maoist fighters studied here by Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, the Indian iconoclasts dealt with by Malvika Maheswari, the Pakistani adepts of Farhat Hashmi covered by Faiza Mushtaq or the real-estate entrepreneur whose autobiography constitutes the focus of Laurent Gayer's paper have all found empowerment through subjection, be it to a party, an ideology, a charismatic leader or God himself. In South Asia as elsewhere, the political relevance of exemplarity lies in its effect of 'empowering subjection' (Audrain 2004). And this holds true for both the adepts of men and for the increasing number of adepts of women of exceptional merit.

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## NOTES

1. As suggested by a supporter on his website: [http://movienepal.com/?page\\_id=1011](http://movienepal.com/?page_id=1011)
2. Comment posted by 'Renu' on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2007 on the website whoisdeep.com: <http://www.whoisdeep.com/2007/09/23/indian-idol-3-winner-kaun-hoga-wo/>
3. Islamic martyrs singularize themselves from their Christian counterparts in their relation to violence: the former kill and die in battle whereas the latter usually stick to non-violent means of protest and let themselves be put to death by their adversary; in practice, though, the Church sanctified death in combat until the First World War (Kantorowicz 1951).

4. Thus, in Classical Greece, heroes longed for a 'good death' to join the exclusive group of the *aristoi*, the 'greatest', eternally remembered and honored (Vernant 1989).
  5. See for instance: Raja Menon, 'Pilgrimage, for a brave son', *Indian Express*, 28 November 2008, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/pilgrimage-for-a-brave-son/398134/>
  6. Adelhah here draws inspiration from cultural anthropologist James Clifford and his notion of the 'reinvention of difference' (Clifford 1988).
  7. In the Indian subcontinent, the development of comics on an industrial scale dates back to the late 1960s and the development of ACK, whose artists primarily drew their inspiration from Marvel comics but also from 'local practices drawn from artisanal traditions', which gave the characters depicted in these stories a 'primordial look' (Chandra 2008: 5).
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## INDEX

**Keywords:** achievers, conservatism, exemplarity, heroes, martyrs, materialism, morality, role models, subjectivation

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