

Writing for the journal: a guide to scope

What the journal publishes, how to write the Transformation Notes that every paper carries, how to present a paper, and nine published papers to read before you write.

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1. Why scope matters

Before any referee reads a manuscript, an editor decides whether it belongs in the journal. The editors of the *Journal of International Business Studies* describe this first decision as a test of fit, quality and contribution, and say that a manuscript which does not fit the journal's aims and scope is, in general, declined at once; at their journal nearly two thirds of submissions never reach a referee (Beugelsdijk and Bird 2025). *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* publishes a whole guide for authors on avoiding it, with examples of the work it takes, field by field.

This journal's first reading is the **office check** (see [For Authors](#)). It asks the three questions on the [Aims and Scope](#) page. Knowing them before you write saves you months, and saves the referees' time for papers they can help.

The three questions. Is it about India? Does it ask a question about Indian society and answer it with evidence, with Transformation Notes that the paper supports? Is its subject people — how they live, work, believe, learn, heal, are ranked or are governed?

2. Write it your way, then answer five questions

The journal's subject is how Indian society changes and what keeps it from changing. You may study it in any design: a survey, fieldwork, an archive, texts or inscriptions, a policy, a court's rulings, a site. What every paper adds is the **Transformation Notes**: five short answers after the abstract, written by the author and published with the article.

Who and where? The people and the place in India. **When?** The years or period of the evidence. **What moved, or what held?** What changed, or what stayed the same despite pressure to change. **Why?** The reasons or mechanism the evidence shows. **So what?** What follows for the people studied, for policy or practice, or for further research.

The questions come from what good papers in the field already do. In a reading of 40 abstracts drawn at random from twelve reputable journals on Indian society (2018–2025), most named the place, the people, the period and the reasons; about half described a change or something that persisted despite one; and only about one in five said what followed from the findings. The fifth question is the one the journal adds.

Length	What it is
Research article, 6,000–10,000 words	Any design
Research note, 4,000–5,000 words	A careful description of a state, at a stated time and place, that others can measure change against

Word counts include everything: title, abstract, text, notes, bibliography, tables and captions. The Transformation Notes are not counted.

3. How to write Transformation Notes

Journals that ask for a short structured statement beside the abstract are not new. The *British Journal of Educational Technology* requires structured Practitioner Notes in every paper and will not send a paper to review without them; *Development Policy Review* requires a structured abstract ending in its policy implications and returns abstracts without that structure. Research on structured abstracts finds that they carry more information, are easier to read and to search, help peer review, and are welcomed by readers and authors (Hartley 2014).

Write the notes last, from the finished paper. A sentence or two for each heading, 250 words at most in all, in plain language that a reader outside your field can follow. Each answer must be one the paper's evidence supports: the referees are asked to check. If a paper has no clear answer to a heading, that is worth knowing before you send it.

Two examples, written by the journal from published work to show the form. The first is a study of change:

Transformation Notes

Who and where: Naga women and their place in elected bodies, Nagaland.

When: From statehood in 1963 to the urban local body elections of 2017 and the assembly elections up to 2022.

What moved, or what held: A 33 per cent reservation for women in urban local bodies was introduced, yet no woman had won an assembly seat by 2022, and the reservation met with protest.

Why: Resistance grounded in customary law and in claims of group rights.

So what: Quotas alone do not open politics to women where customary institutions hold authority; reform has to engage those institutions.

Illustration based on the abstract of “Politics of Resistance: Political Reservation for Women in Nagaland, India”, *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, 2024. Written by the journal to show the form, not by the article's author.

The second is a study of a mechanism, where the answer to the third question is what held:

Transformation Notes

Who and where: 783 educated, mostly middle-class Bengali families who placed matrimonial advertisements in *Anandabazar Patrika*, Kolkata, West Bengal.

When: Advertisements of October 2002 to March 2003, with a second interview a year later.

What moved, or what held: Marriage within caste held. Families care about education, beauty, light skin and income, yet the preference to marry within caste outweighs them all; one estimate puts it, for a bride's family, at the difference between no education and a master's degree.

Why: The preference is horizontal: families want a match from their own caste rather than one above it, and each caste holds a similar spread of partners. So keeping to caste costs almost nothing in the partner one ends up with.

So what: This is why economic growth has not weakened the role of caste in marriage: marrying within caste costs families almost nothing, so the market gives them no reason to stop.

Illustration based on Banerjee, Duflo, Ghatak and Lafortune, “Marry for What? Caste and Mate Selection in Modern India”, NBER Working Paper 14958 (2009), pp. 1–4 and 14; published in *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 5 (2), 2013. Written by the journal to show the form, not by the article's authors.

The next three sections show three common ways to answer “What moved, or what held?”.

4. What moved: writing a study of change

A study of change compares the same unit at two or more moments and explains the difference. Reviewing research on how organisations change, Pettigrew (2012) names its chief weakness as the failure to link the context and the process of a change to its outcome. A study of social change has the same task. It has five parts:

1. **The unit.** Whose society, and where: a caste, a village, a district, a profession, a school system. Keep it the same unit throughout.
2. **The state before**, with dated evidence.
3. **The state after**, with dated evidence of the same kind, so that the two can be compared.
4. **What changed.** The difference between the two, stated plainly and early.
5. **How and why.** The process, the forces that drove it, and who carried it. This is where the paper's argument lies.

Twenty years apart or two thousand makes no difference. A study that measures what a law, a programme, a court ruling, a migration or a famine did to the people it reached is a study of change. So is a study that shows why something did not change when it might have been expected

to.

5. What held: writing a study of a mechanism

Sociologists and political scientists have argued for a generation that good explanation names the mechanism: the process by which a cause brings about its effect (Hedström and Swedberg 1998; Tilly 2001). A mechanism can bring about a change, or prevent one (Hedström 2005, 25). In India the clearest cases are the ways in which caste is kept: through marriage, schooling, land, ritual and the vote. A mechanism paper should show:

1. **The result** to be explained: what is produced, kept in place or stopped.
2. **The parts and the people who act:** households, castes, landholders, officials, councils, matchmakers.
3. **How what they do brings the result about or holds it in place,** shown with evidence at the level of the people acting, not only in aggregate figures. Explaining mechanisms rests on an account of social action: of what people do and why (Gross 2009).
4. **Where it does not work,** if you can: the group that escapes it, or the place where it fails. Contrast is often the strongest evidence that the mechanism is real.

A mechanism may be studied at one moment in time. It is the other side of change: what makes it, and what prevents it.

6. Writing a research note

Description is one of the principal purposes of social research, alongside exploration and explanation (Babbie 2021). It is sometimes dismissed, but good description is fundamental to research and has added a great deal to what we know of society (de Vaus 2001); it deserves to be pursued in its own right, not only as a step towards causal claims (Gerring 2012). Some established journals publish shorter peer-reviewed pieces of this kind: the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, for example, takes research notes that advance a descriptive analysis, and papers presenting new datasets, which must set out how the data were collected, show the care taken, and argue what the data make possible.

The journal's research note follows that model. It must:

1. **Ask a descriptive question and answer it:** what is the state of this, here, at this time.
2. **Set out how the evidence was gathered or read,** and show that it was done with care: the survey and its sample, the interviews and how they were chosen, the archive and what survives in it, the inscription and how it was read.
3. **Say what it makes possible:** which question about change, or about a mechanism, it lets someone answer, and how.
4. **Say where the material can be consulted:** the data, the questionnaire, the transcriptions, the object.

A careful description made at one time is what a later study of change starts from. The national survey used by Desai and Dubey (2011, below) went back to the same households in 2011–12.

7. How to present your paper

- **Title.** Name the subject and, if you can, the finding. A title that names the unit, the place and the period tells the editor at once what the paper is.
- **Abstract** (150–250 words). State the question, the people and the place, the period, the evidence, and the answer.
- **Transformation Notes** directly after the abstract and keywords, under that heading: the five answers, 250 words at most. The manuscript template has the box ready.
- **The first page.** State the question and the answer.
- **Order.** For a study of change: the unit, the two states, the difference, then the process and its causes. For a mechanism: the result, the actors, how the mechanism works, then where it fails. For a research note: the question, the material and how it was gathered, what it shows, and what it makes possible.
- **Recent work.** Take up the recent scholarship on your subject. Editors read a bibliography that cites nothing from the journal's own pages as a sign that the paper is not in touch with the discussions the journal hosts (Beugelsdijk and Bird 2025). Ours is a new journal, so cite the work in your field that our readers will know.
- **One argument.** A paper that tries to cover a whole field is better as a case study or two, tied to one argument (*South Asia*, desk-rejection guide).
- **The rest:** Chicago notes and bibliography, an anonymised manuscript and a separate title page. See [For Authors](#).

8. Papers to read

All nine are about India and can be read free at the link given. Three show a change, three show something that held, and three are careful descriptions. They are chosen to show the shape of the work, not because the journal shares their conclusions. Some are longer than our limits.

What moved: a study of change

1. Klasen, Stephan, and Janneke Pieters. 2015. “What Explains the Stagnation of Female Labor Force Participation in Urban India?” *The World Bank Economic Review* 29 (3): 449–78. <https://doi.org/10.1093/wber/lhvo03>

Unit: married women in urban India. **Before and after:** five national surveys, 1987 to 2011. **What changed:** very little — participation stayed near 18 per cent while incomes, education and wages rose. **How and why:** household income and husbands' education on one side, the slow growth of the sectors that employ women on the other. Read it for how a study of change can explain why something did *not* move.

2. Choithani, Chetan, Robbin Jan van Duijne, and Jan Nijman. 2021. "Changing Livelihoods at India's Rural–Urban Transition." *World Development* 146: 105617. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2021.105617>

Unit: households at two sites in West Bengal and Bihar. **Evidence:** the authors' own household survey set against the census and mapped data. **What changed:** the move out of farming, the growth of places that are neither village nor town, and labour migration. Read it for how fieldwork and census series are joined to show a change at local scale.

3. Kumar, Arun. 2025. "Producing Artisans: Apprenticeship and Skill Training in Colonial India." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 48 (6): 1465–84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2025.2572153>

Unit: apprenticeship in artisanal work. **Period:** 1850 to 1950. **What changed:** a master–apprentice bond held by ritual, custom and community norms was altered in workshops undergoing commercialisation, where debt came to shape it; craft industries, technical schools and government enterprises each used apprenticeship in their own way. Read it for a study of change built from historical sources.

What held: a study of a mechanism

1. Anderson, Siwan, Patrick François, and Ashok Kotwal. 2015. "Clientelism in Indian Villages." *American Economic Review* 105 (6): 1780–1816. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20130623>

The puzzle: panchayat elections in rural Maharashtra are free, fair and well attended, yet policies that would help the poor majority do not pass. **The mechanism:** clientelist vote-trading, kept in place by an elite minority's ownership of land and traditional social superiority. Read it for how a mechanism is shown from a survey designed for the purpose.

2. Mosse, David. 2020. "The Modernity of Caste and the Market Economy." *Modern Asian Studies* 54 (4): 1225–71. First published online 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X19000039>

The question: where is caste in India's market economy, if scholarship keeps it in religion and electoral politics? **The argument:** that scholarship and policy have shut caste away from the market economy, while caste in fact shapes how that economy works. Read it for a mechanism argued against the way the literature frames its subject.

3. Banerjee, Abhijit, Esther Duflo, Maitreesh Ghatak, and Jeanne Lafortune. 2013. "Marry for What? Caste and Mate Selection in Modern India." *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics* 5 (2): 33–72. Free working-paper version: NBER Working Paper 14958 (2009). <https://doi.org/10.3386/w14958>

The question: how does the preference to marry within caste shape who marries whom? **Evidence:** a dataset of people who placed matrimonial advertisements. **The mechanism:** a strong preference for marriage within caste, which in equilibrium changes little in who is matched with whom on other traits. Read it for how endogamy, the mechanism that keeps caste, can be measured.

A research note: careful description

1. Jensenius, Francesca R., and Gilles Verniers. 2017. "Studying Indian Politics with Large-scale Data: Indian Election Data 1961–Today." *Studies in Indian Politics* 5 (2): 269–75. <https://hdl.handle.net/11250/2651914>

A seven-page piece that calls itself a research note. It introduces constituency-level data on India's state and general elections from 1961, and describes how the data were created and cleaned and how they can be used. Read it for the shape of a short research note built around material that others will use.

2. Desai, Sonalde, and Amaresh Dubey. 2011. "Caste in 21st Century India: Competing Narratives." *Economic and Political Weekly* 46 (11): 40–49. Free author manuscript in PubMed Central. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3379882/>

A careful description of where caste stood in 2005, from a national survey of 41,554 households: caste disparities in education, income and social networks. The survey went back to the same households in 2011–12, so a description of this kind is what a later study of change starts from.

3. Asher, Sam, Tobias Lunt, Ryu Matsuura, and Paul Novosad. 2021. "Development Research at High Geographic Resolution: An Analysis of Night-Lights, Firms, and Poverty in India Using the SHRUG Open Data Platform." *The World Bank Economic Review* 35 (4): 845–71. Free copy in the World Bank Open Knowledge Repository. <https://doi.org/10.1596/40832>

Presents an open data platform covering some 600,000 villages and towns, with illustrative analyses that show what it makes possible. Longer than a research note, but read it for how to describe material, show its quality, and point to the questions it can answer.

9. Before you submit

- ☐ The paper is about India, in the sense on the Aims page, and its subject is people.
- ☐ It asks a question and answers it with evidence.
- ☐ Transformation Notes after the abstract: who and where, when, what moved or what held, why, so what — all five answered, each supported by the paper, 250 words at most.
- ☐ The length is right: a research article 6,000–10,000 words, a research note 4,000–5,000, counting everything except the notes.
- ☐ Chicago notes and bibliography; an anonymised manuscript; a separate title page.

Not sure? Send a proposal — a working title and an abstract — through the [submission page](#). The editorial office replies within seven days to say whether it fits. See also [Is my paper in scope?](#)

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