ABSTRACT: In the last two decades in India there have emerged a variety of social movements advocating for rights-based legislative and regulatory changes. This activism has resulted in tangible successes since the mid-2000s with the emergence of a number of policy-making innovations and rights-based Acts, such as the National Food Security Act, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the Right to Information Act. What explains the emergence of these social movements and legislative changes? Moreover, are these Acts an indication that India is pushing away from neoliberalism or are they simply palliative measure that will facilitate greater neoliberalisation? A number of authors have sought to understand the emergence of rights-based social movements and legislation by recourse to Karl Polanyi’s notion of a ‘double movement’, in which the continual expansion of the market will be checked by a counter-movement to protect society against the depredations that result from attempts to commodify land, labour and money. This paper, however, argues for a reconstructed Polanyian framework which understands the ‘rights revolution’ as the product of what Nancy Fraser terms, a ‘triple movement’, wherein social movements champion a third political project of emancipation in response to the ambivalent outcomes of prior movements for social protection. It is argued that this approach better explains the unique aspects of the new legislative changes which rest on procedural inclusion, accountability, transparency and responsiveness. An analysis of the Acts and their early outcomes suggest however, that while they are more than a palliative and have the potential to significantly alter state-society and intra-societal relations, their significance may ultimately lie in their ability to shape, rather than challenge, processes of neoliberalisation in contemporary India.
BIO: Dr Priya Chacko is a lecturer in international politics at the University of Adelaide. She has previously held teaching/research positions at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand and the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. Her current research interests include poststructuralist and postcolonial approaches to foreign policy analysis with a focus on India, non-Western/decolonial thought in International Relations, and the politics of food security policy-making in India in the post-economic reform period with a focus on civil society activism and shifting state-society relations. She has published on these issues in various journals including Journal of Contemporary Asia and the Review of International Studies and is the author of Indian Foreign Policy: the Politics of Postcolonial Identity from 1947-2004 (Routledge, 2012).