

# ***SOCIOLOGICAL BULLETIN***

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## **DISCUSSION**

### **The Poser**

#### **Mooting South Asia: Utopias and Possibilities beyond Geo-political Calculus**

*Dev Pathak and Sasanka Perera*

South Asia, a coinage with enhanced political currency since the Cold War, ideally requires more than the dominant geo-political approach for it to be understood within its multiple complexities. But any departure from the convenient geo-political formulation of South Asia, mostly upheld by South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), yields a perplexing variety of possibilities. How to tangibly imagine a region if not merely as a conglomeration of nation-states? What could be empirically verifiable and yet cognitively deeper in terms of an alternative imagination? These, among other myriad questions constitute this discussion note based on the one-day seminar (6 February 2015) organised by Department of Sociology, South Asian University, New Delhi in collaboration with Japan Foundation under the theme ‘South Asia?: Explorations of the Region, from Within and Without’.

The moot questions anticipate the necessity to dislocate South Asia from the conventional framework of area studies while also seeking to loosen the framework of area studies. The dislocating indeed underpins relocating it, inter alia, in the domain of folk and popular culture, art, cinema, poetics and politics, and organic contacts in everyday life, civil society initiatives, and fluid religiosity. In other words, it is imperative to discuss South Asia in a civilisational matrix which connects the residues of the past with the contemporary, the aesthetic with the political, and the

prehistoric with the historic. This is where interdisciplinary orientation in sociological enquiries assumes significance.

The civilisational existence of South Asia, according to Shail Mayaram, emanates from the continuity of language, culture and traditions evident from Colombo to Karachi to Kathmandu to Delhi. Its precursor can be defined through a series of socio-cultural and post-colonial movements. This is persistent in the instances of ‘cosmopolitan vernacular’ mapping pre-modern to modern milieus. Instances of Veerashaiva movement of Karnataka, traditions of saint poets in which Kabir contributed, and Maulana Daud’s *Chandayan* connecting *Braj bhasa* with Persian literary tradition are a few cases in point. Furthermore, the continuity of religio-political thoughts and spontaneous sense of syncretism are characteristic of the region. This perhaps explains the reason why *Nath* worship is present from Balochistan to Bengal and *Pashupatinath* and *Ratan Nath* temples are located in Nepal.

There have been, however, a ‘deworliding’ of this region since the 1950s when contradictions between ‘*desi*’ and ‘*marg*’ started, and subsequently new boundaries became solid. The latter subsumed various wars and displacement and destitution of people. The ‘deworliding’ processes transformed South Asian cities from cosmopolitanism to genocidal cities, from a region of dialogue to nuclearised war zones, from a socio-cultural landscape of tolerance to intolerant insurgency. Contemporary South Asia is thus an ominous consequence of what Navnita Behera suggested as geopolitical calculus embedded in a ‘sovereign paradigm’. In this schema, every nation-state has the fear of the other, within as well as without. India fears small nations in the vicinity ganging up or being influenced by powerful contenders for the status of super power. Similarly, Pakistan has the fear that India will capture its market and disable it economically. The never-ending train of fear reaches myriad stalemates.

Similarly, area studies program in South Asia has a tendency to become nation-state specific programme. Arjun Guneratne’s observation shows that anthropologically under-informed area studies has not reckoned with the need to factor in the instances of social institutions beyond national locations. Hence, by and large, South Asia acquires a grotesque cartography with compartmentalised nations invisible to each other in scholarship. And, ironically enough, to return to Behera’s remark, Track-II diplomacy occurs in this mould, entailing ex-diplomats’ ‘retired radical syndrome’. A possible way out, according to Behera is to envision a ‘People’s SAARC’ with the dynamic role of civil society not hindered by nation states, nor determined by the retired pundits of diplomacy.

But then, civil society is also a turf of contestation and anomalies in South Asia. Chudamani Basnet stressed on the necessity to magnify the Nepal experience about the role of civil society. Though there could be an inherent tendency to overcome the limits of territorial boundaries, non-government organisations tend to be determined by the commerce of social work. Contemporary South Asia is fraught with the anomalous abundance of civil society organisations and the political economy they have helped create.

Furthermore, the dominant imagination of South Asia dwells upon cooperation of capital rather than that of labour, a point that Ravi Kumar stressed. Hence, the SAARC imagination is an impersonal imagination without a hint of organic linkages in the domain of ordinary people, poets, and visionaries of the region. The literary figures of this sub-continent like Nazrul Islam, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Sahir Ludhianvi, among others have shown a sense of a South-Asian character in their works. The rendition of Faiz' poem by Iqbal Bano touches the people's pulses in Pakistan and India alike. Besides, there is an interesting instance of poetic radicalism in the region. Iqbal Bano protested against the ban of *saari* by Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan; Kazi Nazrul Islam, the national poet of Bangladesh, invoked Shiva and articulated mysticism in his poetry. Faiz-Ahmad-Faiz, pertinent exemplar of South-Asian poetry working in Pakistan, also protested against the policies of Zia-ul-Haq. These poets represent the Gramscian idea of the 'national popular'. Therefore, the imagination of South Asia should be based on more inclusive ideas preceding nation-state, underlining the relationship between people rather than between bureaucracies of countries.

In the same breath, it is possible to narrate organic linkages in contemporary South Asia too despite the evident cleavages along socio-political lines. The artists' networks and the 'sharedness' of thematic concerns conjure yet another imagery of South Asia. Looking at three contemporary visual artists, Adila Suleman of Pakistan, Pala Pothupitiye of Sri Lanka, and Ashmina Ranjit of Nepal, Sasanka Perera built up his proposition on the artists' sense of South Asia. Through these and similar artists' works and the way they work, one can see what Rustom Bharucha calls the local mediated by global and regional networks. After the Kargil War, when official communication lines between India and Pakistan was shut down, selected artists from India and Pakistan, through their works and networks, established cross-border communication as exemplified in the *Aar Par* public art project. This is the case among many other artists from across the region too. In continuity, Santosh Kumar attempted to read the religious fluidity in South Asia. Be it in

sacred geography or that of the world of artists, South Asia connotes territorial defiance challenging the disciplinary rigidity in scholarship.

Without resorting to the nation state framework, Irfanullah Farooqi and Dev Pathak highlighted two other routes to arrive at the category of South Asia. One refers to the literary imagination of South Asia via the Progressive Writers' Association. Farooqi stressed that literary imagining coalesces humanism in the context of socio-political cleavages and interface of languages. Ever since the publication of *Angare* (anthology of poetry by progressive writers) in 1932, a trend in poetic negotiations was underway, and it continued even in post-independent nation-states. Similarly, with the advent of popular cinema in various parts of the region, there emerged a possibility of developing a unique idea of melodramatic South Asia. Pathak argued that the surplus of morality and values, encounter with historical upheavals vis-à-vis colonialism and genocides shaped the South Asian performance tradition. The latter has been responsible in determining the nature and scope of cinema in various parts of South Asia. Hence, the category of social cinema, mixing mythological and historical on celluloid, has been a persistent model across cinema industries in the region.

This trajectory of discussion resonates more questions than it provides answers. Most importantly, the dilemma between bureaucratic and idealist notions of South Asia intermittently surfaces with novel colours. It underlines a mix of romanticism and utopian orientation in deliberating South Asia beyond the geo-political and cartographic calculus. But then, utopianism offers a much more nuanced political sensibility than culturally stultified and officially orchestrated idea of harmonious SAARC and its rhetoric of glorious South Asia. Secondly, an alternative imagination of South Asia, being aware of historical tumults and socio-political pitfalls, could engender a better possibility for progress in South Asian studies. This discussion thus paves the possible ways for social scientists in the region to undertake research on the connections, flows, and disruptions in the region.

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## The Responses

### **South Asia beyond Historical Amnesia: The Utopian Possibility of a Return to Geopolitical Calculus**

*Tariq Jazeel*

In seeking to ‘narrate organic linkages *in* South Asia’ while identifying the region’s ‘evident cleavages along socio-political lines’, Pathak and Perera’s discussion note enacts something of a double movement. It at once naturalises the geographical object, South Asia, while at the very same time it seeks to cast into doubt the concreteness of the geopolitical calculus that gives rise to the object itself. ‘What is South Asia?’ This, it seems, is the question posed. But the very formulation of this question presupposes the existence of the object to-be-grappled-with: South Asia. This tension is neither new nor avoidable, simply because one of colonialism’s most problematic yet profound intellectual legacies is its concrete geographical inheritance, its cartographic normalisations. South Asia *is* a region, yes; but it is also a way of looking, a way of writing global space in a taxonomy of regions and states that has its roots in colonial en-counter and the European gaze. South Asia *is* inescapably a result of geopolitical calculus, as are other regional mappings through which we organise this textually inscribed material planet.

It is, therefore, with some degree of caution that I offer a response to this discussion note. There is, no doubt, that flows, connections, organic linkages, and dialogues continue to bind, and to (re)produce, this region. But two points are worth emphasising in response to such an effort to stake these out.

First, when does the desire to stake out connections, flows, and organic linkages lapse into the essentialisation of a region, the instantiation of a geographical imagination born from the assertion of antecedent pre-colonial purity? If, at the regional level, this is a benign, even progressive, exercise in producing South Asia, then the scalar regression of such organicist logic can all too quickly fall back into the retrogressive kinds of anticolonial nationalisms and racisms that have riddled the postcolonial politics of nationhood across South Asia.

Second, that very same search for flows and linkages – organic or not – must, as I have stressed above, recognise that South Asian particularity is at heart a relational and historical product. It exists as a relational product of other global and colonial flows. For example, I am

reminded here to consider how difficult it is for South Asian studies in Europe and North America these days to proceed without due reference to, and recognition of, diasporic South Asian populations who have traced those flows back to their respective imperial metropolises. We might also consider that South Asian literature, cinema, fine art, and other forms of aesthetic modernism exist, and have evolved, in relation to their global counterparts. Furthermore, even the particularities of South Asian religions only exist as objects that cohere under the proper noun ‘religion’ because of the invidious Orientalist science of comparative world religion scholarship. So, it is not just the flows within South Asia that are worth mobilising when we interrogate regional identity, it is of paramount importance that the flows and relations with ‘South Asia’s’ constitutive outside are made visible too.

In other words, let us not forget those brutal but formative colonial encounters and histories that have given South Asia to the world *as* and *through* geopolitical calculus. Let us also stress again the brutality of colonialism, because to do so is to also remind that there was little organic about the colonial violence through the ‘age of discovery’ that constituted and consolidated South Asia as a discrete cartographic region, subject to and of the European gaze. This much cannot now be undone. But that is no bad thing. Instead it is precisely that geopolitical calculus that constitutes grounds for radical possibility. Because it is also the common experience of colonisation and oppression, of independence and incipient postcolonial nationhood, that offer a structure of feeling articulating trans-continental potentials and solidarities for utopian South Asian possibilities going forward. South Asia itself remains a hopeful horizon for postcolonial possibility.

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## **Imagining South Asia**

*R.L. Stirrat*

When reading the deliberations of this Conference, many questions come to mind. One of these is, ‘Of course South Asia exists, but as what?’ As a geographical entity, it has a certain existence, a body of land tacked on to Asia and stretching into the Indian Ocean. This basic position seems to have been taken for granted by the participants in the Conference as it is

a day-to-day reality within which they work, live and experience their numerous frustrations. As a political entity, it consists of a series of states which (sometimes) see their common interests made manifest in bodies such as SAARC – at least at the level of rhetoric. Yet, beyond these two imaginaries, the one physical, the other political, is there anything useful to be had from talking in terms of a South Asian region? I wonder if the idea of the Conference was to discover that kind of ‘useful’ political or intellectual object, and if so, whether that was achieved in some sense?

One way of dealing with the obvious diversity of South Asia – with over 16 per cent of the world’s population – is to talk in terms of ‘unity in diversity’. In a sense, this is what Louis Dumont was arguing many years ago in his structuralist attempt to generate a ‘sociology of India’. Yet this does not really help us, and to an outsider, what is perhaps more striking is not the complacency and blandness of unity but the more dangerous, more challenging, and possibly more fertile challenge of diversity. In a sense, perhaps conferences such as this, which may take certain notions for granted but would also reflectively question others, might point towards a self-critical sociology for South Asia.

Stressing the unity of the region is to downplay other ways to ‘see’ South Asia, as a larger space in which different forces – cultural, political, and economic – come together in different concatenations. It seems that the attempt to see the region in the way visual artists work – as one of the papers attempted in the Conference – ventures in this direction. Taking a regionalist view without taking into account the ruptures, differences, and disagreements embedded in the region risks at worst in underplaying its complexity. This is most obviously the case when looking at the role – both present and past – of the Indian Ocean in creating various linkages between Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and East Africa. Similarly, the ways in which Islam has created a ‘different’ sense of globally encompassing ‘regionality’ makes South Asia as a concept somewhat irrelevant.

In the world of economics, no South Asian country even appears amongst the top ten of India’s trading partners; other countries do not do much better in terms of regional trading partners. At a cultural level, the large South Asian diasporas in the Americas and Europe, not to mention Africa and the Pacific, are creating a virtual world which ignores the boundaries of the region and creates new and exciting syncretism and hybridity.

Yet, clearly, South Asia is not going to disappear as a region: the states, which comprise SAARC, have too much to lose. By stressing the boundaries and identity of ‘the region’; by seeing it as a group of nation states, in contrast to the rest of the world, they can generate non-

threatening narratives of stability and complacency. Hopefully, however, intellectual activities emanating from the region should not become prisoners of these ‘statist’ agendas.

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