

Towards a New Direction of Disciplinary Histories and Practices

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Sociology and Social Anthropology in South Asia: Histories and Practices is a vibrant collection of essays venturing to ask the difficult and uncomfortable questions of our practice as sociologists and social anthropologists and our troubles in reimagining the discipline to forge local connections and seek global relevance. The volume dips into the concerns of epistemic silences, conceptual erasures, the general crisis in theories and methods and the philosophical anchoring of the discipline of sociology and social anthropology in the South Asian region. What are the defining categories of sociology in India? How do we write and represent what we experience through fieldwork? How is the experience of fieldwork grounded in concepts and categories? How do we remain relevant to our students, chosen fields, and discipline? Some of these questions were articulated in the edited book *Towards a New Sociology in India* (Bandyopadhyay and Hebbar 2016). These questions resonate here with a broader focus on South Asia as the volume articulates what a project of South Asian solidarities and a focus on the region might look like for the disciplines of sociology and social anthropology.

The book interrogates the “dominant-subordinate epistemic frameworks” and disciplinary matrices, relevance and applicability of knowledge, the transcendence of crises in disciplines, and mimicry of the West concerning sociology and social anthropology. One of the continuing concerns and criticisms of sociology and social anthropology in India has revolved around the imitation of the West in terms of theories, methods and concepts of doing sociology. Such uncritical acceptance of Western categories and methods in studying Indian society (Bandyopadhyay and Hebbar 2016) emerges from the cultural distance between modern intellectuals (sociologists included) and ordinary people, and the pervasive xenophilia among

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the Westernised elites and their apathy towards social realities of the ordinary South Asian. In grappling with such mimicry of the West, the authors build a case for studying South Asia—not through simply unifying categories of thought and experience—but through ideas and concepts that emerge from interrogating social structures, practices, and identities across the region. Making full and productive use of a comparative perspective and recognising the larger geopolitical context and forces would enable such productive dialogues, sans their slippage into unilinear power matrices. The volume presents a group of scholars questioning the status of “insiders” and reflecting on any accompanying claims of being “enlightened.”

A New Sociology

In the introduction, the editors lay down the possibilities of thinking anew a sociology of the region with a radical, transformative and self-reflective focus. The ideas of “novel possibilities of a new sociology” cannot be seen in a void and must be adequately historicised; the editors remind us. Attempts at such historicisation—examining disciplinary practices and their shifts—have been selective. Consequently, some scholars and their ideas have always been at the margins of the disciplines. Even though the book began for me with the promise of articulating the (dis)contents of sociological and anthropological thinking on South Asia from these margins, it does not deliver on this promise. So in my reading, its value and novelty also become its drawback.

Having dispensed with this critical thought, I now proceed to the brick-and-mortar questions at the heart of the book. The book makes a strong case for a focus

on South Asia, moving beyond simplistic cartographic and geopolitical imaginations and outlining various aspects that make South Asia a subject of scholarship. Its disciplinary, academic and thematic relevance can be viewed in terms of multiple, overlapping and distinctive sociabilities that emerge with the flow of ideas, knowledge, information, capital, technology, art, and cinema. Proximities and conflicts permeate these flows, as do more significant global trends. The volume evokes the idea of South Asia with a collective personality and attempts to think about the kind of epistemic context that can grow from these proximities and conflicts.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 of the book presents a discursive frame to examine the legacies and practices of sociology and social anthropology in the region and reflects on the relevance of the disciplines in understanding the “contemporary.” This discursive frame reveals the unequal and dependent relationships in the practice of these disciplines, which present scholars with valid and legitimate themes and topics of research and theoretical and conceptual categories to study them. How does a scholar engage with these creatively and think about the alternative, grounded theories without rejecting the Western epistemic frames altogether?

Siri Gamage addresses this question in Chapter 1 of this book. A simple replacement of concepts and theories is not enough, Patel reminds us, as the “infantilisation” of scientific practices of the global South runs deep. One is left wondering what these practices of the global South are. Do we have any to call our own? Are we not just mimicking Western practices, building university routines and disciplinary contexts in synergy with ideas of ranking, journal views and ratings, and indices that measure the impact of what we research and write? Some essays in the volume ask these difficult questions. A few others are trapped in the presentation of the idea that we are confined to the hegemonic discourses of the global North. The practice of our disciplines is much more than that, as several essays in the volume reveal. Gamage, for instance, provides a handy listing of possible focus areas that may enable the

emergence of a regional framework across diverse national contexts. Some of the suggestions that I found particularly valuable are: not to critically examine the colonial matrix of power but to examine the emergence of hybrid institutions, and ways of thinking and doing and their linkages to neo-liberal models of governance and action; finding ways of resurrecting indigenous knowledge; reflecting on the role of local elites, and the ruling classes in shaping contexts of epistemic dependence and the continuation of colonial ideas, practices, and institutional frameworks.

Part II of the book was the most exciting for me as it comes closest to fulfilling the promise of interrogating the legacies of these disciplines in South Asia to dismantle established hegemonic ideas and routines of disciplinary practice. One step in this direction is in Sasanka Perera's insightful articulation of the insignificance of the divide between sociology and social anthropology in Sri Lanka and its resonance in India, through the practice of sociology and specifically, as evident in the writings of Andre Beteille. However, what is interesting to note is the existence of separate departments of sociology and anthropology in Indian universities and the limited dialogue between these departments. In Perera's essay, there is a

genuine engagement with the "how" question—how can our practice of sociology and social anthropology allow for cross-border interpretations, collaborations and knowledge building? Through a presentation of the history of the discipline in Sri Lanka, Perera demonstrates that the agenda for sociological research has not been locally grounded or formulated. His chapter makes a case for a fuller self-reflective review of the discipline and its practice in Sri Lanka to emerge from its dismal state.

In a similar vein, Ravi Kumar sees "possibility" in developing a "critical sociology" in India, which has the potential to come up with categories with cross-border application and relevance. Following this question, Shaikh Mohammad Kais and Kalinga Tudor attempt comparative readings of concepts and themes across borders. Kais works with a notion of hybridised sociology—blending two or more sociological traditions. Can it have an emancipatory potential when this blending is one-sided and the result of the "captive mind"?

The final part of the book offers some possibilities and suggestions for transcending the crisis of captivity that sociology finds itself in, in this region. These chapters pertain to the disciplinary contexts

in Nepal, Bhutan, and Afghanistan. They indicate contexts where we might work to create regional solidarities through thematic research and expand our view of the discipline through new areas, sites and methodologies of research. The volume is commendable for expanding our understanding of the practice of sociology and social anthropology and bringing together scholars from Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Afghanistan. It is also valuable as it sensitises the reader to the possibilities of a comparative perspective and the building of solidarities to present a "regional" sociology of South Asia. I wish to end with an idea from Roma Chatterji's thoughtful foreword to the book—of concepts emerging from "unexpected places." One hopes that this book will lead other scholars to mine concepts from such places in their "fields" or their readings of non-Western scholars.

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REFERENCE

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