

## The pedagogy of sociology

**TRENDS** The anthology analyses the diversity of teaching experiences in the subcontinent

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In official parlance, qua bureaucratic lexicon, 'South Asia' refers to a conglomeration of nation-states (the member-states of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation [SAARC]). And some of us at the university felt at odds with this overly simplistic, utilitarian notion of South Asia, vulnerable to the scheme of the bilateral/multilateral agreements and disagreements of nationstates. At times, 'we' experienced the grotesque character of such a South Asia in the realm of politics, while at other times, we saw possibilities of symbiosis, continuity and connections cutting across countries in the region and transgressing temporalities within what might be broadly called the realm of culture. Moreover, we have been critically debating what all of this means at different forums at South Asian University. In a nutshell, we have systematically articulated our discomfort with official versions of the bureaucratically (pre)determined idea of the region, and from that feeling of discomfort, we have waged a continuous quest for further exploration.

If this is so, how does one practice sociology in terms of a regional framework when the most basic terminology identifying the region is itself clouded in a somewhat dense discursive fogginess? How can one talk about a sociology 'of', 'for' or 'in' South Asia, when South Asia itself remains largely undetermined as a category in terms of our own reckoning? To a certain extent, we pose this question in our flagship course, titled 'Sociology of South Asia' and offered as part of the postgraduate programme in sociology at the Masters level. One way in which this has been attempted is to see what kind of research has been undertaken in the name of sociology and social anthropology in South Asia, and what kind of absences might mark specific national contexts. This attempt figures in



Academics are likely to have read India-based research GETTY IMAGES

varied formulations in other courses, too. And it is also a crucial question, albeit posed in a somewhat generic form, in the compulsory university-wide course, 'Introduction to South Asia', which the university offers to all students from across disciplines. How do we address this dilemma, created by seeming official clarity at one level and nuanced discomfort and anxiety at another when attempting to understand what South Asia means? A provisional answer is that we deal with the category of South Asia with due agnosticism, steering clear of the temptation to be loyal to official versions. But this does not mean that we do not have faith in what the category could mean. However, we believe that South Asia would become more meaningful as an idea as we begin to move, carefully, some distance away from the rigid boundaries of cartographic and geo-political imaginations, and begin to focus on more fluid ideas of culture, history and continuities, which give life to the region's collective personality. And thus, we keep the quest on.

It is against this backdrop that we discuss the idea of a regional framework for disciplinary history and practices, in which the idea of region is not a monolithic entity. Nor is it a category to which we owe any allegiance as it officially exists today. With

this modest disclaimer, it is imperative to revert to the question of why we should ponder over the issue of sociology within a regional framework. This question would inevitably connect us with the set of questions flagged in the opening paragraph, pertaining to the connecting threads running through disciplinary history from various national or local contexts.

In our own minds, the reason why it is relevant to work towards the possibility of a regional framework for doing sociology and social anthropology is two-fold. One is due to our institutional location and the other is our intellectual unrest about the dominant moulds of sociological reasoning. To begin with, as stated above, our institutional location enjoins upon us a vocational responsibility to work towards a regional framework. South Asian University, with its mandate of the eight nation-states in the region (and this is debatable—why only these eight countries?), is committed to the objective of cultivating regional frameworks of scholarship in terms of teaching programmes and research, as well as in managing social relations within the institution. In a sense, it is this collective ideal that the university vaguely refers to as a 'regional (South Asian) consciousness'.

However, this is easier said

than done, as our daily encounters with young minds from across the region suggests. Invariably, we encounter a question of great significance from our students: our discussions are largely dominated by the cases, instances and theoretical-conceptual formulations rooted in the context of India (a la Indian hegemony in academic practices). This partly comes from the nature of the training of teachers. They are more likely to have read works based on research in India, due to the simple reason that it constitutes a much larger corpus of knowledge, the better known of which are also more readily available in global depositories. Also, compared to India, there is relatively little sociological knowledge that has been produced in the other countries, which are available globally and in English. This is particularly the case when it comes to countries such as Bhutan and the Maldives. In such a context, a student from the Maldives often finds it strange to see little mention of experiences from that island country in the courses s/he follows. Similarly, a student from Bhutan is often perplexed by the reduction of the Himalayan nation-state into a single and incomplete phrase—gross national happiness—as though it were an absolute characteristic of Bhutanese society, culture and polity. And in the wake of a pluralism of experiences, with which the students from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and other countries of South Asia join in the classes, teachers face a creative challenge to their training in sociology and social anthropology. Our students have made us realise that conventional approaches take the differential nature of disciplinary practices across the region for granted, but do not find the means to address it.

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