Refocussing on Regions in South Asia:
A Review Article on Orissa[1]

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Introduction

Recent scholarship around supra-national macro-regions such as South Asia has tried to interrogate the givenness of such 'regions' by re-looking at the linkages and flows between there boundaries. This has led to increasingly nuanced perceptions regarding the intertwining of geography and history. At the same time, generalisations about places such as South Asia are still guided by particular traditions of scholarship that focus on specific sub-national regions such as Bengal, the Madras Presidency or the Punjab; what passes off as 'regional' scholarship (as say South Asian Studies) is in fact 'provincial/sub-national' scholarship. There are two issues involved here. The first one is that of generalisation and scale. We do not propose to address that set of issues in this article. The second set of issues involve the incompleteness of our picture of nation-states, such as India, and supra-national macro-regions, due to the lack of sufficient rigorous scholarship for a number of sub-national regions, and those are the issues that are at the focus of this article.

Caste, religion and region are foundational concepts that provide the grid for much of Indian social science theorising. Unlike religion and caste, region as a category has suffered from a relative lack of scholarly focus. One of the reasons for such a situation has been the dominance of

ethnographic field-based research in Indian sociology. The scholarly interventions of Prof M.N. Srinivas were critical in this regard as his work marked a shift to the field-view as opposed to the textual-cum-historical (and substantively non-theoretical) approach proposed by others such as Prof G.S. Ghurye. After his work, there was a proliferation of field-based studies with varying tracings of structural-functionalism.[2] As opposed to this kind of empirical turn, Louis Dumont's work privileged anthropological meta-theory over empirical field-based work.[3] There have been other attempts at generating theories for India at a civilisational/national level. The works of M.K. Marriott and Robert Inden are the most noteworthy in this regard. The disciplinary thrust of sociology/social anthropology in India has been either to generate myriads of micro-studies, or to generate theories at the civilisational level. Attempts at theorising at intermediate levels have not been as rigorous or numerous.

There have been some unfortunate effects on scholarship in Indian sociology/social anthropology due to such a situation. This has meant that the regional specificity of certain socio-historical experiences is not unpacked. For example, the Bengali 'renaissance' of early nineteenth century, more often than not, uncritically gets framed as 'the Indian renaissance.' Theoretical generalisations made for the whole of India are actually made from an un/under-theorised regional experience.

But this state of affairs is not merely due to questions surrounding disciplinary history and theory; they also have much to do with the political economy of higher education in India. The most neglected regions in terms of social science scholarship are also the areas that lack central universities and a dense network of institutes of national importance. They are also the areas that have had a relatively shorter history of higher education. This is tied to the fact that the central universities and institutions of national importance are centrally funded, and the support of the state governments in India for higher education, especially for social sciences, is comparatively less. This also leads to the impoverishment of scholarship in many regional

[2] Satish Deshpande, 'Fashioning a Postcolonial Discipline: M.N. Srinivas and Indian Sociology,' in Patricia Uberoi, Nandini Sundar and Satish Deshpande (eds), *Anthropology in the East: Founders of Indian Sociology and Anthropology*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007.

[3] Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, (1998) 2006.

centres, although a one way causal relationship is not being suggested. The present state of affairs regarding regional scholarship in Indian sociology is due to a complex intertwining of many factors.

The point might be raised that before proceeding any further, some definition or conceptualisation of 'the region' is called for. This need not be so. Here, one may follow a theoretical move similar to the one attributed to Ranajit Guha by Partha Chatterjee. According to Chatterjee, Guha in his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* identifies the paradigmatic form of insurgent peasant consciousness, and by showing the theoretical necessity of positing such a consciousness, has provided us with the necessary point of departure to probe into various aspects of its history. Perhaps the very first area that is opened up for questioning by this theoretical innovation is the community. As he points out, Guha leaves the concept of community empty of any specific content as an abstract theoretical category while at the same time undertaking a description in a concrete historical context.[4]

What we propose is that the way we talk about regions in India is constrained by a similar dilemma. As has already been pointed out, theories at the level of India/South Asia have often been generalised from un/under-theorised experiences of specific regions, and there is a need for factoring in the experience of hitherto under-researched regions. But the matter of construction of regions is necessarily a historical exercise that is deeply implicated in the way the nation-state itself is imagined. Hence, what is suggested here is that instead of theories about the category of the region, what we need are historically sophisticated descriptions. Of course a category cannot stand in for everything. Purely as a strategic device, we suggest that the category of the region stands in for any geographically-correlated social formation below the level of the nation-state, and above a cluster of villages/panchayats in the South Asian context. The actual content of the category will vary according to the theme of enquiry, and the level of significance that a particular historical context imbues this category with.

Some Recent Formulations Regarding the Region and the Regional in the Indian Context

In India, the point of origin of the discussions on regions seems to start with the rise of nationalist politics during the late colonial era. By the early 1920s, the idea that India is composed of a multiplicity of 'natural' socio-cultural regions was well-established. This inflected social science understanding also; for example D.P. Mukherjee, one of the founders of sociology in India, emphasised the idea that India is a collection of distinct socio-cultural formations bounded within specific regions and was not a unity. In a certain sense, concerns with the region as a conceptual category in India have been tied to concerns surrounding *regionalism*. Therefore, more often than not, regions seem to figure in scholarship only when mobilisations surrounding them seem to create 'problems' by indulging in extremist politics.[5] But there have been some attempts at interrogating the region as a conceptual category. For a good review of scholarship on the topic, the introduction to a recently edited volume by Rajendra Vora and Anne Feldhaus may be referred to.[6]

Over the last few years there has been some rethinking regarding the idea of the region in India. One of the more important formulations has been the one advocated by Arun Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan.[7] They try to defreeze and render flexible the concept of the region by making it denote 'subnational to multinational formations.'[8] They 'propose regional as a descriptor for modernity not just because of its semantic attraction, but as a sort of halfway house for a traveller between the global and the local. Instead, we propose regions also because we consider them the social and discursive sites where the production of modernity occurs.'[9]

Another attempt at reformulating the idea of the region is made by Tejaswini Niranjana and Sanghamitra Misra in an article reporting the

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4   Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments; Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.

5   Rajendra Vora and Anne Feldhaus, 'Introduction,' in Rajendra Vora and Anne Feldhaus, *Region, Culture and Politics in India*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2006.

6   *Ibid.*, pp 7–23.

7   Arun Agrawal, K. Sivaramakrishnan (eds), *Regional Modernities: The Cultural Politics of Development in India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.

8   *Ibid.*, p. 14.

9   *Ibid.*

proceedings of a workshop on the region, where they argue that most of the solutions proposed to end the confusion surrounding the idea of a region often take the geography as a given and commit historical anachronisms. The workshop papers they summarise, problematise many of the givens surrounding the conceptualisation of the region in India. These include the conflation of a linguistically relatively homogenous space with a 'region', the givenness of geographical regions, historical anachronism, and the objectivity of regions (as opposed to 'subjective' and 'affective' regions).[10] This discussion provides some interesting points of departure, but it fails to firmly foreground the neglect of certain regions in social science scholarship, and the ways in which this process of knowledge production is inflected in terms of the political economy of location *inside* India.

The recent works of Sugata Bose that posit the Indian Ocean as an inter-regional space provide another point of departure for reconceptualising the region. He forcefully argues for unpacking the naturalised supra-national regions such as south or south-east Asia, and sees them as colonial constructs. By focussing on the Indian Ocean as an arena of inter-connections, Bose tries to free the imaginings of the region from notions surrounding territoriality, and argues for relooking at the Indian Ocean as a complex network of economy and culture.[11] But this project of de-territorialisation, if it may be so termed, has to take into account the fact that our knowledge of many South Asian regions, such as Orissa or Assam is incomplete or patchy at best, and that stories of interconnections can only be told when we have clearer ideas about the entities being connected.

Therefore, the need of the hour is to strategically reify the idea of the region, at the state, and sub-state levels (i.e. at the sub-national level) for purposes of more 'representative' scholarship in/of South Asia. There are many reasons for the desirability of such a move. This fits in with Partha Chatterjee's call for writing 'confederal' as opposed to 'national/regional' histories of India. If the nation has to be interrogated and destabilised as the conceptual frame of scholarship in India, and by extension in South Asia, then one of the ways of doing so is to re-imagine the histories of 'India'

through the ways it has been varyingly constituted through a changing set of regions.[12]

If development was the ideology that was central to the passive revolution through which the nationalist elite forged its hegemony in the late-colonial and post-colonial era, then the mode of its operation can only be studied in its regional manifestations. The regions (at the level of the states as well as the sub-state regions) are the units of operation of the pre-colonial elite (that is the dominant castes of the various regions) again coming to their own after independence, and provide sites of articulation of their power without causing substantive rupture. This is more so because of what Sudipta Kaviraj calls the essential diaglossia of the nationalist project that later came to be reflected in the linguistic reorganisation of the states. Till perhaps the end of the Nehruvian era it was impossible to be an Indian without simultaneously being a Keralite or Oriya.[13] What this means in practice is that 'regionalism' has been the most legitimate way of asserting community, and provides a node for negotiating with the post-colonial state. One also has to keep in mind that other markers of identity are also essentially regional in nature; a Santhal is a tribal in Jharkhand, but not in Assam.

If one takes into account the fact that development has functioned as the reigning ideology of the post-colonial state, this call for strategically reifying regions becomes even more important. The developmental state operates primarily at the level of the states, since many of the more important 'subjects' of development are state subjects under the constitution of India. Hence, the history of development in India is also the history of the development of the states. The states (which are essentially regions or amalgamation of regions) are the nodes at which 'rational' development planning and 'irrational' politics, to use an optical imagery, refract. Hence the states/regions have to be studied as not merely 'sites' of the history of development, but as its frames. In the context of globalisation, as Satish Deshpande points out, the region remains an important spatial concept to interrogate the territorial markers left by globalisation as well as the modes of its appropriation as a process.[14] One of the regions that has been more or less neglected and therefore urgently needs scholarly attention is Orissa.

[10] Tejaswini Niranjana and Sanghamitra Misra, 'Thinking Through Region', *Economic and Political Weekly,* Vol. 40, No. 43, 2005, pp. 4674–78, 4678

[11] Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire,* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2006.

[12] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments.*

[13] Sudipta Kaviraj, 'The Culture of Representative Democracy,' in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *The Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Indian Nation-State*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998.

[14] Satish Deshpande, *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2004.

The Social Science Gaze on Orissa

An academic focus on Orissa as a 'region' has to account for the fact that the boundedness of such regions is always historically and socially contingent. Orissa is an important site for such an exercise because of two sets of issues. The first deal with the specificity of the state as a region has to do with its status as a bridge between north, south and eastern India, and its consequently unique socio-political history, and politically marginal status, while the second has to do with the already mentioned fact of scholarly neglect. But this state of affairs exists primarily in mainstream, English-language, social science scholarship. There is some valuable scholarship on the region in Oriya, and these need to be foregrounded and accounted for. But that discussion will need to wait for some other occasion.

Orissa has been and remains the site of many popular struggles that include environmental movements. Its political geography can be foregrounded to ask productive questions surrounding marginality, neo-liberal globalisation, environmental change, and popular politics; the state is also characterised by, what can be tentatively called, a folk-tribal-classical continuum, and this makes it a productive site for asking questions surrounding identity politics and the politics of culture.

Regarding the question of scholarly neglect, one cannot negate or belittle the work of sustained initiatives like those of the Orissa Research Project of Heidelberg University, and the work of many Western scholars such as F.G. Bailey and F. Appfel-Marglin. But Orissa as a socio-cultural region has been neglected by mainstream social science academics in India. For the last twenty years or so, the scholarly focus on Orissa has been on the decline; this is especially true for Indian academia. What follows is a bird's eye view of literature that is of immediate sociological relevance. The aim is not to provide an annotated bibliography, or an exhaustive review of scholarship on Orissa; it is rather to provide a sense of the nature of the scholarship surrounding the region in order to engage with the questions raised in this paper earlier. Thus, some important texts/bodies of work are missing in the subsequent discussion.

The colonial experience of Orissa has not been adequately mapped out. In this regard, perhaps the work of Biswamoy Pati has been the most significant. He has reconstructed 'subaltern' movements like the Laxman

Naik revolt of 1942 in the wake of the Quit India Movement.[15] He has also mapped the anti-colonial and anti-imperial movements in the quarter century before Indian independence, and has unravelled the contradictions within the nationalist movement in Orissa.[16] More recently his work has focussed on the experience of colonial modernity in the context of epidemiology, and has charted new territory in the historiography of Orissa.[17] His work, by steering between the nationalist approach and subaltern historiography has tried to articulate the specificity of the 'popular' and the centrality of the 'populace'.

In social anthropology, F.G. Bailey's work was central in putting Orissa on the world anthropological map. His work can be located broadly within the framework of the Manchester School. His work on Orissa focusses on social conflict and emphasised the analysis of actual social situations. It also demonstrated a concern for social processes in case of conflicts and conflict resolution that are observable. His work posited itself squarely against the extant scholarship on the sociology of India that was built around the dichotomy between the 'field view' of M.N. Srinivas and the 'text view' of Louis Dumont.[18] In fact, Bailey has been one of the persistent critics of the Dumontian structuralist framework, and in the process has contributed to the regional sociology of Orissa by doing rigorous empirical work.

F.A. Marglin's work on temple worship and kingship in Orissa has engaged with a parallel set of questions, and along with Bailey's critique has contributed to an important interrogation of Dumont's work. By detailing what she calls alternative 'axes of value' in Hindu society and culture (primarily values associated with kingship and the ritual position and the role of women) she argues that 'purity' is not as encompassing as Dumont would have it. She provides a sophisticated picture of the ritual functions

[15] Biswamoy Pati, 'Storm over Malkangiri: A Note on Laxman Naiko's Revolt (1942),' *Social Scientist*, Vol. 15, Nos 8 and 9, 1987, pp. 47–66.

[16] Biswamoy 'Pati, Peasants, Tribals and the National Movement in Orissa (1921-1936),' *Social Scientist*, Vol. 11, No. 7, 1983, pp. 25–49; and Biswamoy Pati, 'Of Movements, Compromises and Retreats: Orissa, 1936-1939,' *Social Scientist*, Vol. 20, Nos 5 and 6, 1992, pp. 64–88.

[17] Biswamoy Pati, 'Siting the Body: Perspectives on Health and Medicine in Colonial Orissa,' *Social Scientist*, Vol. 26, Nos 11 and 12, 1998, pp. 3–26.

[18] F.G. Bailey, *Caste and the Economic Frontier: A Village in Highland Orissa*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1957.

of kingship, and with rigorous ethnographic work demonstrates the misunderstanding and simplification inherent in the Dumontian assumptions about the nature of kingship and polity in India. She shows that, in Orissa, royal power can be interpreted in terms of 'auspiciousness' which is a value that is foundational to ritual and social life. As she demonstrates, if it is the notions of purity and impurity that apparently underlie caste society, then it is the notions of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness that underlie kingship and some other ritual domains.[19]

Burkhard Schnepel's work has tried to mediate between the Dumontian notion of the realm of the sacred/religious encompassing the political, and the more recent formulations by theorists such as Dirks, Raheja and Kulke who try to understand Indian society by giving greater attention to the sacred and ritual as a body of action that is related to the political in complex ways. His work extends the questions surrounding little kingdoms and the nature of the 'political' and of statecraft in India by looking at the little kingdom of Jeypore in South Orissa. By interrogating the patronage of the kings of Jeypore of the goddess Durga, he posits the political and the religious as two distinguishable, yet complementary and interrelated, domains.[20]

Hermann Kulke's works in this regard continue with an older German tradition of theoretically informed Indology, and has done important work on the Jagannath Cult. His work on kingship and the Jagannath cult has addressed certain important questions regarding the nature of the state in India.[21] He was also one of the central figures of the Heidelberg University project on Orissa, and played an important role in maintaining a certain amount of academic focus on Orissa for the last three decades or so.

In the field of cultural psychology the work of Richard A. Shweder should be mentioned. Susan Seymour's book, in the same discipline that takes Bhubaneswar as its field, reports the results of an intensive study of the way girls are socialised. Through longitudinal research, she tries to locate the impact of urbanisation and modernisation on family and gender relations, and her work is an important contribution to the study of family and gender in the regional context of Orissa.[22]

Not much work has been done in locating Orissa as a distinctive region. The historical processes through which Orissa became a socio-cultural region and the socio-political contradictions that underlie it are yet to be explicated. The work of Panchanan Mohanty merits mention in this regard as it productively locates the Oriya movement in the middle of the nineteenth century (that was instrumental in reinstating Oriya as the language of instruction as opposed to Bengali) within the broader debates between the Anglicists and Orientalists.[23] The work of Nivedita Mohanty on Oriya Nationalism should also be mentioned in this regard. Her book on the subject gives a comprehensive account of the rise of Oriya nationalism and the creation of Orissa as a modern administrative unit under the rubric of the Indian state, as well its growth as an affective entity.[24]

As already mentioned, Orissa as a region is not a given, and in no way an essentialist history for the way it has been recently imagined as an administrative unit can be claimed, although there have been some claims made regarding the pre-colonial origins of Orissa as a region. Such problems get compounded when we realise that the current Indian state of Orissa is itself composed of areas that are claiming statehood on the basis of the presumed existence of a distinct socio-cultural region, e.g., the demand for the Koshala state. Thus, Orissa has to be seen as a region that is continuously getting re-imagined, and such processes have been present from the very beginning of the demands for constituting Orissa as a single administrative unit based on claims of a singular linguistic and cultural heritage, primarily defined by the Jagannath Cult. The exercise of imagining Orissa was, from the beginning, a process of contestation in which the pre-colonial elite played a significant role. Despite or perhaps because of our call for greater focus on Orissa as a distinct region, there is all the more reason to problematise the ways in which it has come to be constituted as an entity. An important

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[19] F.A. Marglin, *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985.

[20] Burkhard Schnepel, *The Jungle Kings: Ethnohistorical Aspects of Politics and Ritual in Orissa*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2002.

[21] Herman Kulke, *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in India and Southeast Asia*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1993.

[22] Susan Seymour, *Women, Family, and Child Care in India: A World in Transition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

[23] Panchanan Mohanty, 'British Language Policy in 19th century India and the Oriya Language Movement,' *Language Policy, Vol. 1, No. 1*, 2002, pp.53–73.

[24] Nivedita Mohanty, *Oriya Nationalism: Quest for a United Orissa*, Jagatsinghpur: Prafulla, 2005.

part of such a project has to be a re-look at the modes through which the pre-colonial elite in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries re-imagined the social space around a territory in the Oriya movement, the specific caste/class, gender and sub-regional markers of such an elite, and the its continued dominance in the region in the post-independence period.

Conclusion

As the preceding discussion shows, there is a need to produce sophisticated scholarship surrounding hitherto neglected regions in order to have a more complete picture of Indian social formations. This would involve strategically reifying regions at the sub-national level. In India, the states provide a readily available category for theorising, especially regarding the history of development and political history, since most Indian states are as much socio-cultural entities as they are products of administrative exigency. The study of regions within and across the boundaries of the states such as Vidarbha or Bundelkhand will also come within the rubric of such an intellectual project. In the present conjecture in the history of social sciences in India a certain creative 'packing in' of conventional scholarship surrounding hitherto neglected regions is necessary before their 'unpacking' is either possible or desirable.

One such neglected region is Orissa. The state poses a conundrum in terms of theorising environmental and social movements and environmental sociology in India. As a region, it has been the terrain on which many 'successful' environmental movements have been fought. These range from the Chilika Bachao Andolan to the anti-mining agitations in western Orissa. Curiously, the region has also been singularly devoid of progressive, identity-based politics in the post-independence period; dalits and tribals are yet to mobilise themselves successfully in a sustained manner on the basis of their ethnic/communal identity. A refocussing of sociological attention on social movements in Orissa may lead to interesting formulations regarding the linkages between the nature of extant social structure, and the success or otherwise of issue-based struggles.

Extending the work of scholars like that of Sheldon Pollock[25] regarding the nature of pre-colonial social formations and the relationship between

language and power to regions such as Orissa can also help us map out the production of such regions in the pre-colonial period, and can help us in formulating colonial modernity in a much more comprehensive manner. This is especially so in the case of Orissa (as posited by G.N. Dash and cited by Bishnu N. Mohapatra) as Oriyas in the pre-colonial period apparently already had the consciousness of belonging to a distinct socio-cultural region.[26] Orissa as a site of scholarship has the potential to provide us with interesting points of departure about questions surrounding the formation of vernacular cultures, and the way they are implicated in the production of regions.

There are practical considerations for an academic refocussing on Orissa as well. Orissa was and continues to be a poor state. The poverty levels in the state have more or less stagnated for the last two decades or so. Yet over the last decade, the state has seen an increasing penetration of global capitalism as it is rich in mineral resources. This has been accompanied by significant disruptions of local livelihoods and social structure. Thus apart from providing interesting points of departure theoretically, a sociological refocussing on Orissa can contribute to our understanding of the local social formations in all their regional specificity that can in turn guide public policy.

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[25]   Sheldon Pollock, 'The Cosmopolitan Vernacular', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 1987, pp. 6–37.

[26]   Bishnu N. Mohapatra, 'Self-Definitions and Otherness: Contexts and Sources of Early Imaginings in Late-Nineteenth-Century Orissa,' in Vora, Rajendra and Anne Feldhaus, *Region, Culture and Politics in India*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 2006.