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The Utility of “South Asia” (2017)

Anne Murphy, University of British Columbia

The idea and practice of Area Studies has been in crisis for some time, and there is considerable validity to the critiques that have unfolded in past decades. I will not rehearse them here. It is with due recognition of the problems that accompany the use of “South Asia” as a way of organizing knowledge, however, that I argue here, still, for its utility as a way of conceptualizing space and culture (since clearly both these are tacitly contained within the notion of “area” or “region” which operates). I do so for two reasons: first, because of the intellectual work that is enabled by thinking “South Asia,” and second, because of the ethical possibilities that open up alongside it. This does not negate or deny valid criticism of “area studies” writ large, nor disregard the arbitrary nature of any carving up of space and culture (as also is true with time, the other axis that divides our fields and approaches); such divisions must be construed in heuristic terms, not as instantiating enduring boundaries or categories of meaning. This goes without saying, it seems, but warrants repetition lest we see the problem of the region as unique. It is in these terms, therefore, that I suggest the complex ways in which certain positions are enabled by “South Asian Studies” as an idea and a practice that are not allowed through other means.

The Productive Competition of Competing Ideas of the Region

Punjab, where I locate my own research, is particularly well served by attention to South Asia, as a region. This is so for two interrelated reasons. First is the problem of the national, which asserts itself persistently when the larger region is rejected as a ground for engagement. While this is certainly not the intent in the criticism of regional studies, it has acted as something of a default pragmatic result in institutional and organizational terms: if we don't think “South Asia,” how else do conferences, committees, and associations get organized? This is commonly where the idea of the nation asserts itself. This is obviously problematic for any attempt to think about and through the Punjab, which as a whole now only functions as a broader “region” and not a geo-political entity since it was divided between two nation-states in 1947 (as unfixed as even that region's boundaries surely have been in the *long durée*, in its changing and contested forms). Not only is pre-1947 culture and history too easily partitioned through such nationalizing discourses, but also effaced, are post-1947 developments across the region as whole that are broadly comparable, despite their location in separate nation-states. The recent work of Virinder Kalra (2016), for example, has demonstrated how the border both ruptured existing ties but also created broadly comparable dynamics on each side of the border in the production of Punjabi music and its relationship with the national and with religion. The same emerges within Punjabi literature written in both India and Pakistan, which are linked not only through a Diaspora community that engages

with both, but through parallel commitments and conversations that exist on both sides of the border (Murphy forthcoming a.)

In the pre-1947 period, the issue is of course even more urgent. Farina Mir (2010) has explicated the history of what she calls a “Punjabi literary formation” in nineteenth and early twentieth century Punjab, formed outside of direct colonial control and expressive of a local and yet cosmopolitan vision of being Punjabi, which ran counter to the more divisive religiously defined political identities that prevailed in colonial Punjab—and contributed to conditions that led to the partition of the province between Pakistan and India in 1947. Mir's excellent work has encouraged an entirely new view of cultural production in the undivided Punjab, across scripts and community boundaries, to reveal that which was shared among Punjabis regardless of religious background. Only a regional perspective, which pushes past the national (and, as Mir showed, a preoccupation with religious identity, and with script), can account for such ongoing connections.

The solution to this problem, however, is not only solved by assertion of “Punjab” as region, as a counter to the national. Doing this does not allow for full consideration of the strong ties between Punjabi cultural, political, and social formations and those of its neighbors, in what is now Sindh, Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi, and beyond. This is so in the modern period as in the pre-modern. The modern Punjabi language and literary formation in the post-partition period, for example, both counters and mirrors the complicated position for Punjabi language and literature under British rule that Mir explicates, and also has wider connections. The Punjabi language has been implicated in the post-colonial state of India in the search for a platform for the expression of Sikh interests. This was most dramatically visible in the fight for a linguistically (and culturally) defined Punjabi *sūba* or province. Yet, while this development seems quintessentially Punjabi and not replicable outside the region (and by definition unique to Indian Punjab and impossible in Pakistan, marked as it is by Sikh political formations in particular), it is a mistake to see it in isolation. First of all, the quest for a Punjabi speaking state was of course not unique in the post-colonial state, although it did take place after the first other major linguistic divisions in the period (which yet continue today). So, it was indicative of a larger project that continues today and, as Paul Brass (1974, 287) rightly noted early on, can only be understood in the context of the post-colonial state of India in relation to the Hindi movement and already existing issues around the imbrication of language and religious identity in the Hindi/Urdu controversy. As Tariq Rahman has similarly argued, “the Urdu-Punjabi controversy was an extension of the Urdu-Hindi controversy” (2002, 395): we cannot see these in isolation, and must understand their relationship with discourses around religion and language beyond Punjab's borders. Similarly, the violence and conflict in Punjab in the 1980s and 1990s cannot be understood outside of a broader understanding of the rise of Hindu nationalism across north India; viewing Punjab in isolation does not allow for understanding of the forces and changes to which Punjabis were responding in this period, and which have subsequently exerted a profound cross-regional impact. We must understand political developments in Punjab in this larger context to understand them fully.

We see a parallel set of issues in the pre-colonial period. A Punjab-centered approach in the pre-modern does not allow us to understand the emergence of Punjabi among other vernacular literatures of the period. Tariq Rahman has noted that one of the earliest datable uses we have for Punjabi from a text in the 1620s is as “the means to an educational end,” to learn Persian (2002, 381); it was neither the language of state before the colonial period, nor during. There is, as

Purnima Dhavan's (2017) emerging research shows, evidence for the emergence of Punjabi in seventeenth century *fiqh* (legal) and other texts, and its emergence overall is deeply tied to the emergence of other languages, particularly Braj and Urdu. The question of Punjabi as a literary language is, therefore, a complex one, and its history must be drawn in multiple locations and with consideration of diverse materials. As a whole, the historical evidence for Punjabi as an early modern language does not easily map to contemporary understanding of the language and its scripts. For example, while Sikh cultural production in Gurmukhi is generally seen as being “in Punjabi,” Sikh texts are linguistically diverse. Some of the languages found in Sikh texts in Gurmukhi—particularly Braj, which characterizes the compositions of the later Gurus in the Guru Granth Sahib and the historiographical literature associated with the Sikh tradition that emerges in the eighteenth century—are now seen in the genealogy of “Hindi,” but this is a political or social, not linguistic, definition. Allison Busch has described the broader difficulties of defining the boundaries of Braj; in her words, Braj “often appears to be congenitally impure, that is to say, hybrid and multiregistered” (2010 116; on the difficulty of drawing its boundaries, see 85-6); as she has also noted, the designation of its identity is almost always politicized (Busch 2010, 88-9; on parallel discussion of the issue of Hindi vs. Urdu, see Phukan 2000, 18-9). Indeed, as Heidi Pauwels has noted so well, instead of seeing “watertight categories” among New Indo-Aryan languages in the period of their emergence and literarization (to borrow a phrase from Sheldon Pollock), “we could here too speak of a North Indian continuum of literary expression” where “linguistic boundaries between these various idioms were often fluid,” (2009, 208; see also Orsini and Shaikh, “Introduction,” 15). This is not by any means to place “early Punjabi” within a longer “Hindi” literary history—such a project is driven directly by the nationalizing interests mentioned earlier—but instead to challenge the notion of *any* of these early languages being subsumed simply within later modern teleologies, as has been asserted effectively in recent discussion of “before the divide,” as described by Orsini 2010, of Hindi and Urdu (for further on this problematic for Punjabi, see Shackle, 2013 [2001], 116). Punjabi's early literary history, in short, still needs to be worked out fully. Francesca Orsini's recent emphasis on multi-linguality, following on the work of Shantanu Phukan (2000), invites us to consider the relationship among languages that constitute early modern cultural production; sources of the period that Orsini examines, for instance, do not distinguish between Avadhi, Braj and other forms of what we call *Hindavi*; the term *bhasha* is used for all (although there was in at least some contexts a sense of a separate “Punjabi”). Indeed, multi-linguality, Orsini rightly argues, is “a set of historically located practices tied to material conditions of speech and writing, rather than as a kind of natural heterogeneity” or, further, a sense of absolute difference (Orsini 2012, 228). Understanding the emergence of Punjabi out of and within this rich linguistic matrix, and its ongoing relationships with these languages in the modern period (which is just as complex) requires thinking beyond the borders of Punjab, to the diverse communities of languages and literary cultures that Punjabis were in conversation with (Murphy forthcoming b). As we enter into the colonial period, this necessity is becomes even clearer. We cannot see the place of Punjabi outside of wider debates about language and identity in that period as well.

The Ethics of Rethinking the Region

I have argued here for the intellectual work that is allowed by thinking “South Asia,” the fruitfulness of rethinking regional boundaries in the making of regions *within* South Asia. Indeed, critical reflection on the idea of the region of “South Asia” itself, as a whole, can only be

productively engaged *through* the utilization of the logic of the region in multiple terms. Ethical considerations attend directly to this intellectual work. A particular kind of ethics emerges from such reconfiguration of boundaries to allow for the discovery of new kinds of commonality that can challenge communitarian and nationalizing logics of exclusion, and can complicate and multiply the possible political and social positions that can be staked out.

We can see the ethical utility of this, again, in the example of Punjabi language in both the pre-modern and modern periods. Thinking about language in broader regional terms (not just in terms of “Punjab” as a region) allows us to understand more fully the emergence of Punjabi within and alongside the emergence of other vernaculars in the early modern period, if we can allow ourselves to let go, perhaps, of the idea of “Punjab” and “Punjabi” for a period of time. This is enabled by the kind of broader regional frame that “South Asia” engages, and is lost, if we allow narrower regional frames to operate upon our representation of the past. In the post-colonial period, the idea of “South Asia” allows for a space for dialogue that crosses the India/Pakistan border, to understand the complex ways in which the producers of Punjabi literature on both sides of this border seek to engage across it. We can see this most clearly in the role of apnaorg.com, the “Academy of the Punjabi in North America,” which positions itself as “A non-religious and non-political organization of all Punjabis for the promotion of Punjabi language, literature and culture,” across Gurmukhi and Shahmukhi (the term used in Punjabi for the Perso-Arabic script), and across national boundaries. This is the spirit in which the Dhahan Prize for Punjabi Literature, an international prize for Punjabi literature, was founded in Vancouver, with its inaugural award granted in 2014.¹ This initiative maintains a commitment to fostering Punjabi in both scripts and across national boundaries. In this case, it may seem that “Punjab” is the functional regional category at work, and this is certainly true to an extent: Punjabi as a language of literature, across script, can represent de-nationalizing interests particularly well. But the strong connection of Punjabi cultural production to that in other languages—in particular Urdu, which so many ethnic Punjabis have utilized as their literary language of choice—requires careful scrutiny, particularly in the common connections to the Left that undergird them. Indeed, as Pritam Singh (2010) has noted, what we mean by “Punjabiyaat”—the cultural basis of “Punjabiness” that undergirds commitment to the Punjabi language across borders—changes dramatically in different hands: “It is in this sense that Punjabiyaat appears as a floating principle and project, an elusiveness that can be considered a sign of both weakness and strength” (see further discussion in Murphy forthcoming a). “South Asia,” that elusive and shifting category, may be stronger for these features as well: allowing for allegiances beyond Punjab that will elude us if we allow another set of borders to operate. “South Asia” as a category will always be a problem because it remains in tension with the nation-state formations that govern our understanding, still; that is perhaps a problem with it, and its value.

Closing

¹ The author of this article chaired the Advisory Committee for the Prize from 2012 to 2014 and was on the Advisory Committee as a member at the time of writing this essay. Dr. Raghbir Singh, editor of the Punjabi language journal *Sirajana*, is the current Advisory Committee Chair.

The productive role of the Diaspora in this construction of “Punjab” and “Punjabi” is appropriately signaled above by reference to the “Academy of the Punjabi in North America,” but this phenomenon merits attention in its own terms, in relation to the idea of “South Asia.” Attention to the South Asian Diaspora as a category also allows a way of thinking that both embraces and defies the region (where the region is the country of domicile—the idea of Diaspora challenges its hegemonic status, but reinstantiating the experience and idea of a prior affiliation). I would argue again for the value of this notion of “Diaspora,” in its very indeterminacy: “South Asia” has a productive role to play, here, too, since nationalizing discourses in relation to Diasporic formations are as complex as they are in the South Asian context. This is particularly visible in British Columbia, Canada, where there is significant protest regarding the Indian state's treatment of Sikhs in the 1980s and 1990s and, for a good number, a rejection of the “Indo” in the conventional term “Indo-Canadian.” There is something enabled in the Diaspora, the same way that something is enabled in the term “South Asia,” that allows for inclusion and dialogue beyond the imposition of the national. The idea of a “South Asian Diaspora” allows for commonalities across now distant national boundaries, challenging regional identities at home and beyond.

At the same time, as we think regionally in critical terms, it is also crucial to distinguish South Asian Studies from South Asian Diaspora Studies. These are interconnected, sometimes intimately, but also are not the same thing. If attention to region can teach us anything, it is this. It is too easy to allow Diasporic frames to shape engagement with South Asia, particularly in linguistic terms (privileging English language work that speaks to/for South Asia over work in vernacular languages, some of it produced in places like Vancouver and Toronto, that also demands a hearing). The case of the transnational life of the Punjabi language today reveals this vividly: the need to attend to the particularities of national contexts, even as we recognize Punjabi's dynamic life across borders. We can only understand Punjabi as a language today and in the past if we locate it in both the Punjabs and beyond. If “South Asia” can help give us the space to do that, it is a good way to think.

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