

Regions, Identities and Entangled Geographies: An Introduction

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Introduction

The understanding of a region as a pre-given fixed entity with definite linguistic and territorial boundaries has dominated a large number of writings on Indian history and politics.¹The presumption that contemporary states and political territories existed in their present forms with more or less similar characteristics in the historical past is not only teleological, accentuating a certain degree of parochial and singular attitude; but it also overlooks the changing, diverse, and interactive nature of regions. Regions are not geographical entities that pre-existed from time immemorial. Rather regions came into being due to the impact of social, political and economic processes embodied in human interactions in history, acquired distinct identities and in turn conditioned those historical processes that were instrumental in their evolution.²

Thus, regions are always dynamic, acted upon within the frame of time/temporality and space/spatiality. Under these circumstance, there can never be a linear and exclusive way of perceiving a region as a lived space as social, economic and political processes never have an unidimensional influence upon history. There have been multiple perceptions of a region which have been in constant dialogue with each other leading to tensions and marking of hierarchies of and within a region/s, creating a network of entangled geographies.

These networks and perceptions within the framework of time and space further form the basis of inter-relationships with and within different regions, laying the bedrock of regional histories.

The central idea of this issue of *Summerhill* is to examine different ways in which various groups, individuals, texts, communities and so on perceived a space and

landscape as a region over a period of time. It is further highlighted that in the process of delineating a region the tropes they included, excluded and magnified were located in their respective cultural and socio-historical contexts. The essays, translations and the book reviews in this issue while dealing with the ways in which regions and their identities evolved over a period of time, raise some of the ideas outlined above. The essays further highlight the complexities and diversities that constitute a region, deconstructing the idea of a homogeneous regional history and a seamless regional identity. In many ways, the focus of the analyses shifts from regional histories to histories of regions.³The essays have a wide range and include the following: the spatial-temporal delienation in the Sangam poetry of the Tamil region; multiple ways in which Delhi was perceived in medieval and early modern period; differing ideas of hygiene that defined the Himalayas in a particularist way; historical identities of Kumaon and the North-East region; water as a physical demarcation of a composite space in Ellora-Daultabad-Khuldabad; the notion of social exclusion in creating the 'regional other' in a nation state; and finally the idea of a cultural frontier reflected in the delineation of space and regionalities in Hindi and Bhojpuri cinemas.

Regions, Space and Identities

From the middle of the twentieth century, the idea of space as a social entity became predominant in academic researches. Henri Lefebvre's famous work, *The Production of Space* (1974) clearly stated that, '(Social) space is a (social) product.'⁴According to Lefebvre, 'In reality, social space 'incorporates' social actions, the actions of subjects both individual and collective who are born and who dies, who suffer and who act.'⁵Going beyond the idea of a physical space, Lefebvre characterized the social space as 'perceived', 'conceived' and 'lived'.⁶These three concepts corresponded with the three notions of: 'spatial practice' in the form of a real physical space;

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'representations of space' in the form of an imagined space, for instance in urban planning, maps and so on; and 'spaces of representation' that invested the space with symbolism and meaning.⁷ Thus a space was 'an interlinkage of geographic form, built environment, symbolic meanings, and routines of life.'⁸ Lefebvre's idea of social space that prioritized spatiality over temporality and yet combined them was instrumental in developing the *spatial turn* in cultural studies and historical analysis in the twentieth century.⁹ Subsequent studies associated geographic analysis with social space.¹⁰

The exhaustive framework for the concept of social space discussed in *The Production of Space* in many ways can be extended to the idea of a region. Since regions evolve, transgress, disintegrate and are reconstituted through historical forces located in temporality and materiality, social forces are bound to play an important role in their production. A region 'is not simply inherited from nature, or passed on by the dead hand of the past, or autonomously determined by the "laws" of spatial geometry as per conventional location theory.'¹¹ Therefore, it cannot be taken for granted.¹²

One of the enduring characteristics of a region described by scholars is its geography and the latter's interactions with human beings. Often specific geographical features are identified exclusively with a region, according to a certain degree of exceptionalism. While it is worthwhile to relate histories of landscape with the historical production of a region and subsequently a territory, it should be noted that the man-nature interaction that is instrumental in such a production is ongoing and dynamic.¹³ Regional histories should take into account this dynamism that contributes to the fluidity of the region as a geographic, political and social space.¹⁴

Regional identities are one of the crucial elements of politics today. Associated with the correspondence between a particular language and territoriality, these identities do not have seamless histories. Since regions were dynamic, so were these identities. As various political formations developed and states were established, the linguistic and territorial identities kept shifting, sometimes redefining and reconfiguring the regions. Thus, there was not one language but many linguistic traditions within a region.¹⁵ Similarly there were multiple markers of culture, community and ethnicity that were changing and transformed the social space of a region over a period of time. Regional histories have often overlooked these complexities, reducing regional identities to homogeneous territorial, linguistic and cultural fixities. In fact, the social, cultural and geographic spaces in a region provided templates for the articulation of various identities with various social groups inhabiting different areas and representing different political

economies. For instance, tribes relegated to the political and social margins of the 'dominant' political formations, often represented regions themselves, incorporating 'diverse smaller socio-economic systems'.¹⁶

Interestingly, the literary texts written in the historical past delineate the ways in which the geographical space changed over time.¹⁷ In these texts, 'The knowledge of the Indian subcontinent also progressively increases and leads on to a conscious and specific, but at the same time flexible, construction of regions and the identities are embedded in them.'¹⁸ In fact, most of these texts record collective historical memory contextualizing the region within the changing frame of spatiality and temporality. According to Aloka Parasher, 'Such collective memory of a society permits it to keep territorial boundaries vague and therefore, space remains inclusive over time. On the other hand, as trained historians, we wish to define territories in several ways, especially political and thereby, naturally exclude as we then tend to concomitantly but erroneously, project rigid and contained boundaries that goes counter to the way the ancient texts describe them.'¹⁹

The essays in this issue capture the essence of regions, space and identities. While highlighting the landscape and geographic frames in the context of a region, the essays also deal with the production of a region and its evolving identities in history. *Spatial Perceptions in Early Tamil Poetry* by V. Rajesh discusses the idea of region as an abstract cognitive category that acquired real dimensions through the poetic symbolism and conventions in the Sangam literature, which in many ways reflected the collective memory of the Tamil historical past. The essay highlights the multiple spaces in the Tamil region through metaphorical tropes of the landscape, especially flora and fauna (*tinais*), which symbolized the emotions of love, war and heroism. The space while reflecting 'the moral of the community' was complex and nuanced with several layers of tensions and contradictions.

The two essays on the Himalayan region discuss the ways in which the state policies and issues of community identities informed the region as a lived space. Queeny Pradhan's essay, *Imperial Hygiene and Popular Culture in the Colonial Hill Stations in the Indian Himalaya* explores the connections between the creation of hill stations especially Shimla and Darjeeling, the introduction of the municipal and civic laws, and the issues of health, disease, sanitation and demographic changes of the hill regions in the nineteenth century. The English colonists initially perceived the Indian hill stations as natural health resorts, but later, influenced by the overarching concerns of cleanliness and hygiene, introduced municipal laws and regulations that controlled the movement of people and segregated them from most of the spaces in the hills. The essay highlights the tensions generated due to

the indigenous responses to this imperial surveillance and control. The hill people, according to Pradhan, considered the western medicinal practices as a British attempt to regulate their behaviour and habits and were suspicious towards the specialized demarcated spaces of hospitals, convalescent depots and sanatoriums, which according to them segregated patients from their respective families. Vasudha Pande's *Kumaon Histories and Kumaon Identities c. 1815-1990s* discusses the relation between a region, history writing, idea of a nation and regional and caste identities. The essay shows that how history writing over several generations constructed the perceptions of Kumaon as an 'imagined space' through the symbolisms of landscape, people and region. Against the background of Kumaon's transformation from a British imperial division in the nineteenth century to a separate state of Uttarakhand in the 1990s, the essay traces the development of different worldviews of history writing: the colonial perspectives that typified Kumaon as an exceptional and exotic region; the nationalist standpoint that foregrounded a separate Kumaoni identity but privileged the brahmanical distinctiveness; and finally the post-colonial writings that romanticized the region while attempting to integrate it with the idea of the nation. The essay further discusses that the writings of sociologists, anthropologists and modern writers of the 1990s presented a more nuanced and complex understanding of the region and interrogated these views that essentialized Kumaon into a particular typecast of a hill society.

Studies in the recent past have questioned the exceptionalism of hills in general and the Himalayas in particular as a distinct geographical unit that is culturally and economically homogeneous. The binaries of 'highland' and 'lowland' have been debriefed and the mystique of the Himalayas is now debunked and complexities and contradictions are highlighted.²⁰ Sajal Nag and Binayaka Dutta's essays reflect yet another important aspect of modern state formations in the 'region of northeast' located primarily in the mountainous landscape.²¹ Sajal Nag in his essay, *Production of North Eastern Region* questions the idea of 'northeast' as a definite region and emphasizes that the region was gradually shaped by 'contingent historical events', starting from the British encounter with the tribes in the eighteenth century. The essay discusses the role of the British ethnographic accounts, census and survey reports and works of Christian missionaries in crystallizing the otherwise fluid and vague boundaries of diverse ethnic groups. According to Nag, the colonial records attributed a certain territorial and cultural definitiveness and constructed a community consciousness, which the various tribes subsequently internalized. Binayak Dutta's essay 'A Legacy of Divided

Nations' discusses the role of the history of partition of the subcontinent in re-imagining the geo-political space of the northeast. According to the author, partition is a living history as it continues to influence and determine the postcolonial narratives of this region till day, especially in the context of migration and settlements that often challenge the political boundaries. The essay discusses the complex process of colonial cartography that imposed artificial borders and frontiers alien to the geography of the northeast, disturbing the fluid identities and re-configuring them into specific regional identities alien to the communities and tribes of the hills and plains in the northeast India.

Entangled Geographies: Multiple Perceptions, Contradictions and Conformities

Plural imaginaries representing different identities have always characterized a space. These imaginaries not only conceptualized the space as real and transformed it, but also interacted and negotiated with each other. In this process, some of the ideas and networks became dominant, some marginal and some disappeared, erased or preserved in historical memories. These regional and spatial diversities representing multiple imaginations of the geopolitical space created *heterotopias*, 'in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture', were 'simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted', 'juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that' were 'in themselves incompatible.'²²

The essays in this issue engage with multiple perceptions of a region, their interactions and networks of entangled geographies. Swapna Liddle's *Idea of Delhi* discusses several conceptions of Delhi ranging from its mythic past to a historical one when its various locations became, capitals of different political dispensations and shrines of sufi *dargahas* and temples. The essay deconstructs the composite Delhi, as we know today and demonstrates that the notions of 'Old Delhi' and 'New Delhi' were always shifting as the former continuously replaced the later. Thus there was never one seamless Delhi. These multiple perceptions of the region in every period derived their respective inspirations and ideational resources, from a complex multi-layered historical past preceding them, borrowing from it *selectively* and transforming the imaginations into real lived spaces. Yaaminey Mubayi's essay, *Delineating Sacred Landscapes* uses the methods of landscape archaeology to discuss how water and its physical trajectories define Ellora-Daultabad-Khuldabad as a social and ecological region. Underscoring the relationship between man and environment, the essay highlights the multiple

voices of diverse communities, which inhabit these areas and articulate their respective relationship with water through myths, symbols, religious beliefs and institutions and memories. Through ethnographic interactions with the communities, the essay presents the multi-layered socio-economic and spiritual contexts of the sites and settlements in this region. Further, Mubayi highlights the different ways in which groups and communities in the Ellora-Khuldabad-Daultabad region interacted with each other depending upon their individual attitudes and strategies of use of water and its resources.

Space is political too, providing sites of contestations and assertions of power. Very often, states and empires define and dominate a region, exercising control through the organization of space and claiming to resolve conflicts and contradictions. However, as Lefebvre points out, 'Within the same space there are, however, other forces on boil, because the rationality of the state, of its techniques, plans and programmes, provokes opposition....These seething forces are still capable of rattling the lid of the cauldron of the state and its space, for differences can never be totally quieted. Though defeated, they live on, and from time to time they begin fighting ferociously to reassert themselves and transform themselves through struggle.'²³ Queeny Pradhan and Vasudha Pande in their respective contributions discuss the tensions between the British colonial state and the people of the Shimla and Darjeeling and Kumaon respectively. Pradhan's essay highlights the colonial mapping of the hills through municipal regulations that were infused with the ideas of racial and civilizational superiority and condemned the native settlements as unhygienic with a propensity to spread epidemics and other contagious diseases and the consequent reactions of the local populace. Vasudha Pande points out the ways in which region of Kumaon became contested in various history writings representing different political ideas and communities. The histories of the region in the writings of the various sections of the local intelligentsia were counter viewpoints not only to the British imagination of Kumaon but even to each other. Gowhar Yaqoob's essay *Social Exclusion: Historical or Colonial Legacy?* focuses on the ways in which the ideas of social exclusion have underscored policies of the colonial and post-colonial states in South and South-east Asia which have a certain degree of overlapping histories. The essay discusses specific contexts of de-colonization and nation building in these regions and their political attitudes towards social exclusion.

The historical context of time, space and social configurations thus become crucial. There is no one single identity of a region and attempts to impose one can lead to ruptures of far reaching consequences. Roger Chartier while writing on the 'various ways in which France was

visualized in the past' rightly pointed out that, 'The effective exercise of power ultimately presupposes the homogeneity of the social body over which it rules, whereas the figures revealed that France was not all uniform, and that immense cultural gaps separated its provinces. Politics had to take these variations into account; they were not random, but could be shown by careful analysis to have a coherent pattern.'²⁴ The essays of Sajal Nag and Binayak Dutta demonstrate that the colonial attempts to impose a homogeneous identity upon the northeast region were countered with assertions of those identities that were suppressed.

While the political and economic representations of a region represents several spatial dimensions, the cultural dimensions of a region and within a region represents variegated forms of spatiality that are symbolic and highlight the ways in which a region is perceived. *Between Ramgarh and Bamba* by Akshaya Kumar reflects on the linguistic and cultural homogeneity in Hindi and Bhojpuri cinemas through an analysis of location of places and a constructed spatiality. According to Kumar, these places in the films do not have any definite geographical location, though they are supposedly situated in northern India and some metros, mainly Mumbai with a 'routine vagueness of location' that cannot be traced in the map. However, these places have acquired an iconic status of an archetypal regionality in the popular culture through constructions of imaginaries that overlook sub-regional cultural diversities. Such an artificial seamlessness, this essay points out, represents a certain regional and urban stereotype. Based upon the idea of capitalism and geography, this paper analyses the symbolism that places and locations represent in the Hindi and Bhojpuri films. *The Poems From the Malwa region of Punjab* represent yet another effort to delineate a variegated regional space and regionality within Punjab. Selected and translated by Vivek Sachdeva, the poems reflect the self-identities of the poets rooted in their respective sub-regional milieus and linguistic traditions. Despite their provincial provenance, the compositions have a universal appeal connecting with the larger literary tradition.

Conclusion

The contributions in this issue raise several questions pertinent to the understanding of regions and identities. In many ways they circumvent tracing the antecedents of present day states to the historical past so typical of regional histories and instead engage with complex histories of regions through the prism of political, economic and cultural lenses. The book reviews in this issue analyze the latest writings on the theme of *Regions, Identities and Entangled Geographies*, raising several

questions that problematize as well as appreciate the arguments presented in the books. Thus the analysis of historical processes instrumental in recasting the regions in space and time is crucial in order to comprehend the contemporary regional configurations and their associated political and social contradictions and ambiguities.

NOTES

1. Aloka Parasher-Sen, 'Perceptions of Time, Cultural Boundaries and 'Region' in Early Indian Texts', *Indian Historical Review*, 36(2), 2009, pp. 183-86.
2. *Ibid.*, pp.183-207.
3. Bhairabi Prasad Sahu, 'From Regional Histories to Histories of the Regions and Beyond', *Social Scientist*, Vol.43, No.3/4 (March-April), 2015, pp. 33-47.
4. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. (Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith), Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1991 [1974, 1984], p. 26.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
6. *Ibid.*, 38-40; Stuart Elden, 'There is a Politics of Space because Space is Political. Henri Lefebvre and the Production of Space,' *Radical Philosophy Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2007, pp. 110-11. Also see, Harvey Molotch, 'The Space of Lefebvre.' *Theory and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 6, (December), 1993, pp. 887-95; Łukasz Stanek, 'Methodologies and Situations of Urban Research: Re-reading Henri Lefebvre's 'The Production of Space'', *Studies in Contemporary History*, no. 4, 2007, pp. 461-5.
7. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp. 38-40.
8. Harvey Molotch, 'The Space of Lefebvre,' p. 888.
9. Susanne Rau, *History, Space and Place*, London and New York: Routledge; Łukasz Stanek, 'Methodologies and Situations of Urban Research', pp. 461-62.
10. Similar ideas formed the central theme of the Young Scholars Conference titled, *Historicizing Space* held at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 25th-26th April 2019. For details, see, the *concept note* of the Conference.
11. Harvey Molotch, 'The Space of Lefebvre', p. 887. Also see, D. I. Scargill, 'Space, Place and Region: Towards a Transformed Regional Geography', *Geography*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (April), 1985, pp. 138-41.
12. For a conceptual understanding of region and regional histories, see, Chetan Singh, *Himalayan Histories. Economy, Polity, Religious Traditions*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black in Association with Ashoka University, 2018, pp. 1-33; Also see, Edward W Soja, *Post-Modern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, New York, 1989.
13. Chetan Singh, *Himalayan Histories*, p. 14.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 21. Also see, Bhairabi Prasad Sahu, *The Changing Gaze. Regions and the Constructions of Early India*, New Delhi: OUP, 2013; Kesavan Veluthat, *The 'Early Medieval' in South India*, New Delhi: OUP, 2008.
17. Aloka Parasher-Sen, 'Perceptions of Time', p. 188.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
20. Chetan Singh, *Himalayan Histories*, pp. 23-33. Also see, Jayeeta Sharma, 'Producing Himalayan Darjeeling. Mobile People and Mountain Encounters', *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2016, pp. 87-101.
21. For a general discussion on the idea of northeast see, S. Thianlaimuan Ngaihte, 'The Reality of North-East as an Entity', *Economic Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 50 (December 14), 2013, pp. 13-15.
22. Michel Foucault, 'From Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', *From: Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*, October, 1984; ("Des Espaces Autres", March 1967 Translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec), pp. 1-9; p. 3 and 5. <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/foucault1.pdf>. Visited 12.1.19.
23. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 23.
24. Roger Chartier, 'The two Frances: The history of a geographical idea', *Social Science Information*, 17, 4/5, 1978, pp. 527-54; p. 528 and 530.