

TM 1 Workshop

Language, Region, Knowledge : Colonial Disciplines to Indian Social Sciences

IEG, May 4 -5th 2017

Concept Note

This workshop seeks to historicise the political through thematising the politics of knowledge vis-a-vis the Indian social sciences across a key juncture in the making of Indian democracy.

From the Bengal Partition onwards, concerns about territorial reorganisation in colonial India had been articulated in tandem with political reform towards a more representative administration. Significantly however, concrete moves towards limited avenues of self-government at the provincial levels saw territorial reorganisation being rapidly linked to the possibility of linguistic provinces.

Strikingly, within a polyglot polity characterised by immense linguistic diversity as obtains within the South Asian subcontinent, such direct identification between region and 'its' linguistic identity seems peculiarly incongruous. And yet, colonial and nationalist viewpoints were agreed in presenting linguistic provinces as synonymous with governance through the language of the people. Evidently, the legitimacy of these initial steps towards provincial self-government was implicitly - yet strongly - premised upon the territorialisation of the language issue.

Alongside manoeuvres to define representative structures and territorial demarcations, the decades spanning the late colonial period and early years after Independence simultaneously saw an expansion of the university network and the institutionalisation of social sciences in the university curriculum.

In mapping the metamorphoses of the political, the core question being posed here is to ask how the linking of territory, language and representative structures impinged upon the shape of the Indian social sciences at their emergent juncture within the colonial Indian university system.

Alongside even as the contours of the 'region/regional' within the Indian nation-space were being worked out, the imaginary of linguistic-territorial entities rapidly lent itself to be discursively and tellingly recast as target of an ahistorical developmental vision. Thus, while the embracing of developmental agendas was prefaced by full, formal political acquiescence to the logic of linguistic territorialisation, actual linguistic reorganisation of states had to wait till 1960, a whole decade after economic planning became the centre-piece of the national mission.

How indeed may we historically unpack the intellectual implications of these political- conceptual shifts? In particular, what implications did these shifts have in the choice of paradigms, formulation of agendas and methodological orientations of emerging knowledge-forms vis-a-vis the Indian social sciences?

Workshop Themes

As we know, the historical antecedents of the Indian social sciences lie in the vernacular public domain/s and the simultaneous rise of the 'region' as a political, linguistic and cultural formation as these emerged from the late nineteenth century onwards. Contesting the casting, within colonial ideology, of the vernacular realm as the antithesis of the disciplinary, the Indian social science enterprise derived its legitimacy from its complex allegiances with the vernacular realm.

Propelled by the pressing imperative to frame the possibility of knowledge for/of the nation vis-à-vis the emerging dynamic of the nation/region, History and Literature emerge as the key disciplines in the decades leading to Independence. Through this period, a limited study of Political Economy had formed a part of the undergraduate History curriculum even as History and Literature as the disciplines of prestige took on the challenges of producing canonical narratives of national and regional cultural and political pasts.

Significantly, the transfer of education to provincial legislatures in the wake of the limited provisions for responsible government through political reforms of 1919, saw the reintroduction of vernaculars into university curricula after a lapse of nearly six decades, and the first efforts to institute the social sciences as specialised disciplines that could be pursued beyond the BA level. How did these decisions stem from, and in turn, complicate, the politically charged emerging imaginary of linguistic territories?

In consonance with the trajectories delineated above, and reflecting the claimed prestige of development economics in defining intellectual agendas, after 1947, increasingly the 'regional' within the Indian social sciences was predominantly deployed as a category synonymous with the adroit and selective management of the flow of power, economic resources or cultural patronage between the Centre and its 'dependencies', the states of the Indian Union. How may we interrogate this paring down, post-1947, of the 'regional' and its separation from the vernacular within higher education discourse?

How may we explore and thematise the implications for the political, of this historical trajectory of attenuation of the partnership between the regional, academic and vernacular realms, both in relation to the legitimative discourses around linguistic provinces and developmentalism?