

Possibilities of Seeing the 'Region' Differently

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The papers¹ in this special issue of the *Economic & Political Weekly* aim to tackle the concept of region in its manifestation at multiple scales—subnational (provincial² and others, including city regions), national, and supranational (regions such as South Asia or Bay of Bengal littoral or the Indian Ocean region or global region). Analyses by social scientists in different disciplines have not successfully combined these multiple scales in understanding the different aspects of Indian history and development. For instance, analysts have largely used either the national scale or the subnational, regional scale but rarely, *both* these scales. Either the nation manifests itself in a region or a particular region stands in for the nation. The conceptualisation of the region and an examination of the dialectical relationship between the nation and the region have not received adequate attention so far. Especially for the period after 1947, regions are usually officially-defined bounded entities like states, or substate regions that have official demarcation (like the National Sample Survey regions). This special issue is a preliminary attempt at kick-starting the much-needed project of conceptualising the region in the Indian context in all its diversity—in thought as well as its material manifestations.

Engaging with 'Region'

In certain disciplines like Economics, empirical work is driven by the availability of data and as a result, the construction of scalar entities is also largely driven by the process of data collection. An entity like the "Indian Economy" can be easily posited and analysed because of data availability at that level. Similarly, a provincial-level analysis becomes possible because of the availability of data at that level. However, even at the provincial level, while agricultural or poverty or employment data are abundantly available, it is not easy to perform careful macroeconomic analyses. Moreover, analyses of subnational regions that do not fall under the strict demarcation of these official data sources get left out. For instance, the border regions of two different provinces may have more in common than the cores of these respective provinces. Or, there may be commonalities across multiple provinces along agroecological lines. Or, the relationship between a primate city and its hinterland may help us understand provincial dynamics better than analysing the available provincial level data sources. Data availability itself creates a bias towards ignoring the complexity associated with regional formations. It is our contention that the national economy cannot be understood without positing the region in its manifest complexity and its role in creating the national space. National, overarching entities like the Indian

developmental state or a liberalising Indian state are useful to begin with, but they need to also consider the spatial complexity of the state across different regions. In the extant analyses, even when regional entities are taken into account, they often become testing grounds for national-level explanations. There is a definite need to go beyond these analyses to be able to move between the nation and the region more freely, thereby incorporating the substantial diversity and complexity of social processes that exist in these interactions to create a richer knowledge of Indian society and its history.

Other disciplines in social sciences (such as political science or history or geography) have engaged with "region" in a richer fashion. However, typically the relationship among different scalar entities discussed above is not clearly delineated in these studies (for instance, the relation between the region and the nation). There have also been detailed studies of regional capitalism and regional politics (many of these studies also find an outlet in *EPW*) but these are yet to be integrated into a careful framework of a regional political economy. Using such frameworks and methodological imperatives that would allow us to analyse regions much more carefully, several (new and old) problems can be studied and thrown light on. Thus, for example, the rise of a new capitalist class from agrarian origins in the past three decades in several states, their transformation of state-level politics and institutions and their impact on the national political economy; or the specific caste-based mobilisations in Tamil Nadu and their implications for the long-run trajectory of that economy as also the influence they have on the larger nation; or the ways in which Kerala has managed its social sector while engaging in the global markets, are all problems that can be researched further. Similarly, the vital historical political economy of the Indian Ocean and the ways in which international diasporas continue to impact local markets, or the ways in which farmers' movements across north India transformed sociopolitical relationships are all central to understand India's growth patterns and contemporary history but escape a strictly "national" narrative. Such explorations expand our understanding of both the conceptual basis for "region" in "regional political economy" as well as the methodological alternatives appropriate for explaining regional outcomes.

Regions, more broadly constituted, are often the loci of the most important and vigorous political and institutional

EPW is grateful to Arjun Jayadev and Vamsi Vakulabharanam for putting together this special issue of the *Regional Political Economy*.

experimentation. As such, understanding India's larger development story must involve a more nuanced engagement with the regional- and subnational-level political economy that goes beyond simply recognising and describing the variation in regional political economies. Challenges, however, arise in generating and testing theories that prescribe primacy to subnational-level variables over national-level factors. These range from conceptual understandings of the "region" (for instance, is a region defined spatially, by commonly shared bureaucratic norms, or is it simply an imagined community?) to addressing the theoretical distinctiveness of a subnational explanation of institutional variation. Other challenges include what the appropriate regional unit of analysis and comparison ought to be, or what variables, structures, or processes are most relevant in explaining differences.

Emerging Analytical Frameworks

Emerging lines of research and thinking on regional political economy in the social sciences (most notably, in anthropology, economics, geography, and political science) try to go beyond considering regional polities as merely constituent units of a larger polity and society. Instead, newer analytic frameworks view regional political economies as shaped by distinct (regional) institutional structures or cultural factors with long political and economic histories. This developing line of research has the promise to be a more robust and meaningful approach. Instead of speaking metaphorically about "the Kerala model" or "the Gujarat model" scholars ought to have a much better understanding of the economics, laws, politics, and social institutions that combine to create the actual social histories of these places, how they conceive of themselves beyond a mere geographical commonality, as well as how they relate to one another. Given the vastly different impacts of India's great transformation on its constituent subgroups and regions, a great policy challenge of the times appears to be to generate rich knowledge about the origins and consequences of subnational growth and development, in a way that does not simply reduce this once again to subnationally defined political units. In this special issue, authors from multiple disciplines have addressed both the conceptual issues as well as concrete manifestations of the region in its richer rendition.

The first paper in the collection, by Barbara Harriss-White (p 44), addresses the question of what constitutes a meaningful region and how one can differentially understand the patterns of development in the Indian economy through a geographical delineation of different "regions." She accordingly provides a series of maps that allow for much more nuanced understandings of what constitutes a region within the nation's political units. These are, in many ways, the manifestations of the spatial patterns of Indian capitalism. Thus, for example, she provides a mapping of agrarian regions theorised through different modes of surplus appropriation which would respond differentially to political and economic changes. Similarly, she uses the work of Saraswati Raju to assess the spatiality of gender in the country and therefore, provides another lens to understand how policy changes may serve to affect women differently in these differently

understood regions. Equally usefully, she provides a mapping of caste and ethnicity mapped not as labour but in terms of the ownership of firms, mostly small own account enterprises. Using these unusual and unique notions of regions, she concludes that theorists need to be very careful in proposing a general logic of capitalist economic development in India, and that it is found to have regional variations and features specific to localities. Moreover, she uses her findings to make a case that while political boundaries afford a useful analytical lens, there are many robust regions other than the state-defined ones which may or may not be congruent with provinces, and often transcend these in many ways.

Sudipta Kaviraj's (p 56) piece conceptualises region as a historical concept rather than a geographical entity. As the political, economic, and cultural produce regions differently, he traces the creation of regions from the premodern, colonial to postcolonial imaginations of region. He writes that as scholars of modernity, one needs to have a more historically embedded sense of how modernity has changed things from the premodern to the modern while also acknowledging the disciplinary limits of doing the same. Looking at premodern forms, he tells us how the idea of the region changed within the premodern itself with various historical transformations taking place—from the Mughal empire being an extension of the Persianate cosmopolis to a more fragmented regional identity with the weakening of the Mughal empire. With colonial modernity, the modern state altered the relation between states and their populations and most significantly, turned the boundaries of states into containers of all processes in ways that were not possible in earlier stages of history. In postcolonial times, he argues that regionalism was one of the first contestations that emerged in the Nehruvian command economy with demands for the formation of Andhra Pradesh in 1956. Industrialisation and subsequent migration also changed the nature of regional identities. Liberalisation has only accentuated regional inequalities. He suggests that economic and political regions have in contemporary times coagulated differently and not necessarily along the same coordinates: the way Haryana, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh constitute an economic region without having a political or cultural basis to this "economic region."

Rana Dasgupta's (p 64) paper, part of a larger work looking at capitalism in the postcolonial world, provides a similar counterexample to the idea of a coherent, politically well-defined political boundary as an effective unit of analysis. His focus, however, is not on the regional particularities of capitalist development within the nation. Rather, Dasgupta makes the claim that the region, understood as where capitalism functions according to "local" features, is often much "larger" than the nation state. As he puts it:

the region is not always small. ... The region may be as large as the world, or even larger ... *The world*—if we take that to mean the zone in which capitalism functions "normally"—has shrunk to a size smaller than the region—if we understand *the region* to be where capitalism functions according to local eccentricities and irrationalities.

Dasgupta examines the ways in which the Delhi business elite, like postcolonial elites everywhere, possess attributes that are rewarded by the current capitalist world in which a familiarity

with the more rapacious and mercenary requirements of contemporary capitalism is a distinct advantage. This ability to engage with capitalist expansion, without the inhibitions of Western-style capitalism that has attempted over time to soften its edges by appeals to “rule of law” or “mutual benefit,” has opened to “Delhi-capitalists” (or Lagos-capitalists, Shanghai-capitalists, Accra-capitalists, etc) a whole transnational “region” where they are at home and where cultural and economic processes have their own coherence.

M Vijayabaskar (p 67) takes on a pan-Indian question—that of the stunted Lewisian transformation of the economy or more classically, a “truncated agrarian transition” in the context of one of the more successful Indian states, Tamil Nadu. Even in the context of a high performing state, with a growing manufacturing sector, he finds that the secondary sector has not been able to absorb labour to the extent hoped for. As a result, he argues, the political economy of transition is fraught. He makes the case that there is a need to (re)think about both social welfare nets and how to manage labour in the agrarian question, since even large-scale public and private manufacturing drives have been inadequate for the task. As he puts it,

The agrarian question of labour therefore remains and it appears that the question cannot be resolved entirely within the non-agricultural sector, but possibly will require a combination of the two in conjunction with a strengthened social security net.

While the question and analysis focus on regional Tamil Nadu, the general pattern, Vijayabaskar argues, may have implications at an all-India level. Indeed, the current agitations by communities, such as the Jats, may be indicative of precisely the same patterns across the country. The paper, thereby, provides a clear example of how a regional story can be used to build or at least inform a national narrative.

Narendar Pani (p 73) uses William Cronon’s distinction between first and second nature to contextualise the development of the region of Mandya in Karnataka. He describes how a collusion between the first nature and state produced the agrarian system that exists in Mandya. He traces the emergence of second nature in the region through the negotiations on large dams between Mysore state and Madras Presidency. On the one hand, agrarian economy gets a significant boost and state-led initiative also begins to promote private investment. However, due to the small peasant culture, while Mandya was positioned to benefit from agrarian development, it was not able to extend that success to a wider transformation of the district’s economy. He argues that the contradiction that is created due to the presence of small peasantry and the presence of state intervention in the form of dams and

green revolution ensures that Mandya remains economically backward and dependent.

Seema Purushothaman and Sheetal Patil (p 78) also focus on Mandya albeit in its dialectical relationship with Bengaluru city. They use these two locations to examine how rural communities and geographies are being used for capital accumulation in the urban core of a growing economy. Looking at the farming sector, they show how particular patterns of accumulation can serve to buttress a disequalising overall development, one that is skewed primarily to serving the interests of the urban rich. They point to ways in which a more inclusive model could serve to maintain growth, but to also limit the vulnerabilities associated with the current trajectory.

Finally, Areyee Majumder (p 85) undertakes an anthropological analysis of the post-industrial Hooghly river basin. She argues for seeing a region in particular, and space in general, as a collision or encounter of different times. She sees, therefore, a region such as Howrah as being a kaleidoscope of different times and living between modes of production. As she puts it “Howrah confounds the category of the ‘post-industrial.’ An ‘urban horizon’ emerges here, having less to do with material markers of the ‘urban,’ but more in response to long-term intimacy with manufacture.” Using a host of geographers and social theorists as theoretical guides, she makes the case for seeing region and space as “congealed time” and therefore, subject to multiple representations.

Conclusions

The papers in this special issue point to the possibility of “seeing” the region differently, at multi-scalar levels and from different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. They all complicate the standard notion of a region as being simply a geographical entity and instead, focus on the ways in which regions transgress these standard boundaries, and yet have a coherent and important logic that binds them. Our hope is that this and future collections continue to systematically interrogate some of the theoretical and methodological issues that undergird the study of regional political economy. Expanding our understanding of both the conceptual basis for the “region” as well as the methodological alternatives will allow for a much richer, alternative but unified approach that can understand India’s evolution in a more holistic manner and from the ground up.

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NOTES

1 These papers were presented at the first and second international conferences on Regional Political Economy held at the Azim Premji University (APU), Bengaluru in 2016 and 2017 (and partly supported by the Institute for New Economic Thinking). Sudhir Krishnaswamy and Siddharth Swaminathan from APU coorganised the workshop. This initiative attempted to

create a forum in which scholars from different disciplines brought analytical focus on political, economic, and cultural processes occurring at the subnational level. Efforts at the conference included comparative case studies, data-based political analysis, historical and literary approaches as well as more anthropological research as examples of efforts to understand the working of regional political economies. As a result, the workshop

interrogated some of the theoretical and methodological issues that undergird the study of regional political economics. This issue would not have been possible without the considerable help of Sushmita Pati and Sunayna Ganguly.

2 In this introductory paper, we will use provincial to refer to Indian states, while we use the word state to refer to the more abstract governing entity at any level.