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Possibilities of South Asian Sociology and Regional Imagining: In Conversation with two Nepali Sociologists

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Abstract

This interview explores the feasibility of envisioning South Asian sociology as a distinct academic scholarship, stemming from the collaborative attempts among sociologists from South Asia. It assesses this proposal by probing the current academic landscape and incorporating perspectives from two leading sociologists affiliated with the Central Department of Sociology at Tribhuvan University. However, these conversations do not assert a definitive outcome but presents potential avenues for readers to consider the plausibility of South Asian sociology becoming a reality in the near future. Instead, I plea for a dialogic space among sociologists across South Asia as the rudimentary step for building up South Asian sociological imagination and call for reorienting our disciplinary imagination in tune with the newly emerging forms of interaction between communities and cultures across state structures.

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Introduction

Besides asymmetric academic relations that have warranted the South Asian academic landscape (Deshpande, 2002), the South Asian academic scene is also maked by a conspicuous absence of dialogue among sociologists (Sarkar & Khawas, 2017). Instead of creating a dialogic space that could have fostered the scope for reciprocal knowledge production, sociologists of South Asia continue to reside within the ghettos of "nationalistic intellectualism" (Onta, 1998). It seems sociological scholarship within South Asia, unlike capital, defies the spirit of a connected world that globalization has entrusted upon us. It is not like sociologists

of/from South Asia do not meet with each other. We meet each other as South Asian colleagues—both academically and physically and nowadays even virtually—but in forums generally organized at the behest of the West. We proudly recall the strengthening of ties—such tendencies multiplied in recent decades—with our Western colleagues and institutions. Still, we seldom look forward to, or even expect, similar associations to grow with colleagues and institutions situated in countries in the immediate neighborhood.

So far as the sociology fraternity in Nepal and India is concerned, I am tempted to argue that, we have done very little that might contribute towards developing a South Asian anchorage in our scholarship, although we continue to share deep-seated historical, cultural, and civilizational connectivity that exists much before we learned to think sociologically. Ours is a typical case, where co-presence in reality did not get reflected, even by chance, in our scholarly imagination. In the absence of any shared imagination or even a collective empathy as scholars of/from the region, we feel comfortable practicing our respective national sociologies. Moreover, we celebrate the complacency that has led us to believe that sociological imagination strengthens as we continue to provincialize "little Europes" or "little Americas" in our disciplinary practices from where we never peep beyond our nationalist window to see whatever disciplinary engagement is going on in our South Asian neighborhood. If sociology is the most reflexive discipline among all the branches of social science— my indebtedness to Gouldner (1970) is obvious here—then is it not the right time to think seriously about the absence of South Asianist engagement amongst the disciplinarians?

However, it needs to be pointed out that while sociological research highways between India and Nepal, for example, seem to be rather blocked, regional imagining in Global South scholarship has gained a new lease of life in recent years. A group of contemporary sociologists, cultural theorists and social scientists from the Global South like Raewyn Connell (*Southern Theory,* 2007), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (*Epistemologies of the South,* 2014), Gurmeet Bhambra (*Connected Sociologies,* 2014), Tejaswini Niranjana (*Inter-Asia Cultural Studies,* 2015), Kuan-Hsing Chen (*Asia as Method*, 2010) have emerged with conspicuous relevance in the field. It is high time that sociological scholars from India, Nepal, and other South Asian countries also engage with these sociological currents and develop ways of engaging with each other. If common history gives rise to common problems within South Asian nation states, it is anticipated that global trends in scholarship would also bind them together. I have been struggling with questions and curiosities of these sorts for about a decade and even tried to come out with some possible answers in my recent book, *Contours of South Asian Social Anthropology: Connecting India and Nepal* (2022). It has been a long journey of seven odd years, but far from being tiresome. As part of the project, I interviewed a host of practitioners of the discipline from both India and Nepal.

In the following, I have presented those interviews for a wider readership to map the problems and prospects of a plausible South Asian sociology. It would have been best to have presented all the interviews together but that is not possible given the limitation of length generally earmaked for a journal article. Hence, I have selected only two such interviews of practitioners from Nepal conducted virtually during 2021 winter. Mishra has chosen to publish his interview in its original form, as he had intended, having conducted it in the first place. Luintel, on the other hand, decided to go back and update his thoughts, and our exchange of emails resulted to this revised version. I believe that both sociologists made thoughtful responses, and I end up by offering my conclusion of the questions I posed to each.

Interview of Chaitanya Misra (CM) by Swatahsiddha Sarkar (SS)[1]

SS: *You are one of the few sociologists from Nepal who got trained in India before going to the US for further studies. Then you came back to Nepal and started your journey at TU dedicating more than four decades in different capacities within academia. In this journey, as a whole, when we try to see Nepali sociology the way it is being practiced and framed in higher education institutions, we do not find the courses focusing to a great extent on India. You might ask why such a focus is required at all; to that, I would say, given the fact that the sociological context or social reality in India finds resonance with that of Nepal, I was thinking that Indian scholarship or Indian research should have received a kind of space in the way Nepali sociology and social anthropology developed. However, the reality is different. How would you react to that?*

CM: Yes, I was there from the very beginning. I came back in 1978 after completing my PhD and worked for three years at the Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies (CNAS). In the meantime, there was an invitation to start a department of sociology and I was asked to formulate the courses henceforth. And, in 1981 we began a combined department of sociology and anthropology, and later in 2015, the department split into two separate departments. But for almost 25 years we had a joint department.

In response to your question, I would say that the focus on India is not very high; we do teach Srinivas, Beteille, Gupta, T. N. Madan, and Shah, but the emphasis isn't very high. But now there is space, I think more of Indian sociology should be incorporated, which would be a welcome change. Again, we cannot get away from European and American influences as well. It's more a matter of worry for me that we haven't even incorporated much of Nepal; so, it isn't just about India. We did try and we teach, but there is so little written about the sociology of Nepal. As such, in consequence, when we started the department, we realized we needed some literature on Nepal. So, we brought in MC Regmi and his works on Nepali economy, land tenure, taxation, and so forth so that we should be able

1 This interview was conducted on June 2, 2021 at 2:52 GMT-8 via Google Meet.

to glean social relations using books in economic history or books in political science. So whatever literature that existed in Nepal, good literature, regardless of the disciplinary affiliation of the author, we tried to put that, to some extent, into the courses. Still the proportion of contents on Nepal is low. I don't think it is a satisfactory situation. Similarly, I think there is enough space now to incorporate more of Indian society, economists, political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists; need not necessarily be hardliner sociologists.

In my perspective, I tried to be less localized, I tried to be less presentist. I mean we have certain general things; we have certain specific things, but I think, I tried to emphasize the universal (although every universal must also be looked upon within a specific history); however, I tried to emphasize non-local things, and non-presentist things. Thus, my orientation has been less local and less presentist.

SS: *That way you are, as you were, very critical about the structural-functionalist approach. And that actually gave birth to Indian sociology.*

CM: Yes, true. We did not like parts of Indian sociology because it was narrowly written. What was called "tribal" was done so in such a way that seemed to live apart from the rest and tried to segregate people into different categories, forgetting that they were related. So, my emphasis was on relations between individuals and groups rather than looking at them as separate entities which was predominant in these studies. Even in Nepal, I have been extremely critical of the ethnicist kind of writings that claim as if people lived different lives, completely different lives. Of course, there are specificities, people are different and unequal, but there is still a trite relationship within inequalities, for instance, between Dalits and non-Dalits. So, the vision that people are fully distinct by dint of belonging to different ethnic groups, different religions, different localities, and so forth, I find that totally false…it is not as if people are not included… all people are included but included in unequal terms. So, it is not a matter of not being included but being included in unequal terms.

SS: *There are two more issues related to this: firstly, how do you see the role of the state in the very growth of Nepali sociology (both in terms of intellectual inputs that it desired from the practitioners of discipline as also in terms of institutional support that it rendered to the growth of the discipline) and secondly, how would you reflect on the ways state and discipline encountered each other in the specific context of Nepal?*

CM: We must start by answering the question – why did sociology begin in Nepal? It began as an initiative from the side of government. The government wanted sociology to be introduced as part of development programs, in a very upright sense, from the government's point of view; not to analyze Nepali society, but to help in terms of development. And that is what probably the Indian, American, European advisors must have told them at that time; but prominently American advisors. That is how I was also sent on a scholarship to India to study sociology,

the reason being that I would come back and work with the government and push the development project around.

So, we started the department of sociology with the government's blessings, obviously, and the government continues to fund us. But, today, the state has kind of pushed the university to the margins, political parties have become so powerful that they run the universities now; you have the professional associations of students, clerical staff, teachers, etc., and an overwhelming presence of political parties and many professors align themselves with political parties, rather than to scholarship or disciplines. This has been continuously pushed around by political parties, governments, and state structures. One of the challenges in Nepal now is that scholarship is being way-laid by politics, it is pushed sideways. I wrote a long article in *Kantipur* five years ago stating that it was as if the government was using an army to resist scholarship – an army of academic staff – so that the mission of the university was badly hurt at the altar of political parties. So, the state has supported financially but in the sense of political parties, it has resisted scholarship. It wants to hijack the university system for particular political ends.

SS: *This is the picture in India as well. However, what I am more interested to know is, in India, the state has a kind of intellectual stimulus towards the upbringing of the discipline. Just as you mentioned how through the state's blessings the discipline of sociology began in Nepal; but in India, it did not happen that way. But immediately after independence, Sociology and Economics were considered as the two disciplines whose primary task was to contribute towards nation-building. In this nation-building project, the involvement and assimilation of sociology, very interestingly, merged smoothly by following the universalist project of structural-functionalist presentism, of which you are critical. In his entire journey, Srinivas was steered to study his own cultures, although, in his training in anthropology, he was supposed to study other cultures. Contrarily, he flagshipped a new genre of scholarship – studying one's own culture. So, the very emphasis on studying one's own culture could be understood as a voice that Srinivas raised against E. R. Leech, who was very critical of native scholars, as Srinivas himself projected it. But if we see the larger trajectory of Indian sociology, this particular way of doing sociology and studying one's own society ultimately handicapped our sociological imagination so much so that we never felt it necessary to see Nepal or any other neighboring country within the sociological imaginations, which we could have built up focussing on what could be understood as South Asian sociology. Even the neighboring countries started a similar kind of journey in the post-1950s in what may be termed an epochal epoch, which also has a similar trajectory. But we never came up in the kind of journey, where we could have built up a common plane of scholarship. But we haven't. In conventional sociology, even Indian institutions have no focus on Nepal or any other South Asian countries. How does this myopic way of looking at one's own national boundary ultimately create a kind of handicap, where you can't see the social processes from a larger visionary perspective or in a way that could affect other interests? In fact, we come to know*

about South Asian realities or other South Asian countries only through Western intervention and not otherwise, although we are all placed in South Asia. This is called methodological nationalism and do you think this could also stand as a critique in the case of Nepali sociology?

CM: As a small country in comparison to India, China, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, and just as all small countries are tuned into larger countries but not true the other way around, we may read the case of Nepal as well, read about India and Indian newspapers. Indian channels are available right into my home; hence we are more attuned to India than perhaps India is attuned to us. But as far as scholarship goes what you are saying is absolutely right – we have not made forays from one country to another. I do not know if it was a matter of funds, or psychological, or whatever it is… apart from exchanges during conferences or a few scholars coming from centers like Delhi to Kathmandu with the intention of studying the constitution or the eventful years of political turmoil in Nepal, there has not been any substantial exchange. We could utilize support from, say, B. P. Koirala Foundation, or other funding agencies, or through individual initiatives as well could be a possibility, but that also doesn't seem to happen.

So, in saying what you are saying that we are localized and are forming different states rather than South Asian society as such, or scholarship as such, you are right, we haven't gone to that stage yet.

***SS:** On this, how do you see the involvement of foreign scholarship both in terms of institutional support and research orientation, which continuously appears as a reality in the case of Nepali sociology and in other social sciences as well? Is it not that the possibilities of a South Asian consolidation seem very weak given when we don't have a South Asian focus, or any necessity to think in such a line, but we have advocacy research, which is prominent in Nepal as well? How do you see that contributing to the growth of the discipline? Will it be an intellectual growth of discipline or will it lead towards something else?*

CM: I think the interest in Nepal evolved out of the British-Gorkha linkages. People in the British army, government, and the British academia, even Oxford University became interested in Nepal. They came to Nepal and started writing about it and eventually, the American went everywhere, including Nepal. Indira Gandhi restricted the entry of many Europeans and Americans at a certain stage noting that they were more divisive than contributive, particularly anthropologists and sociologists. That did not happen in Nepal and they continued to come here and also did good work. There are two things to ponder upon – one, Nepali sociologists were not equipped to collaborate with international scholars, which otherwise would have been a great learning. Two, along with Americans and English, the South Asian collaboration should also have come up to a certain level such that we could learn from both angles; and of course, even when Indian government restricted American and European sociologists and social anthropologists to come and study in India, Indian sociologists and anthropologists

could come to Nepal, perhaps, and collaborate with others. That could have been a possibility and that is a possibility even now. So, a larger scholarship – South Asian, Indian, Nepali, American, and European scholarship – could have come together. Even now if there are possibilities we should explore beyond South Asian scholarship, we should explore a wider scholarship.

But, you are also right that a lot of American and European involvements in social and NGO movements have taken place in Nepal. Some of that has been useful while some have not been worthwhile. Among those that have not been useful had ethnicist angles, particularly from the American and European anthropologists. Of course, I do not mean all of them haven't been useful, but many of them stoked the fire of ethnicity very high in the last two decades, to the extent that while the higher caste dominating the others should certainly have been exposed, the emphasis on each ethnic group having a separate homeland was the outcome of what many American and Europeans continued to push along. That impact has been negative, and the entire field of anthropology has been seen as contributing to the ideas of indigeneity and ethnicity. That has had a very negative impact on scholarship in anthropology and sociology to a large extent. This is in a sense a promotion of social separatism and that has been pushed along so hard by some people that it helped to create conflict between various ethnic groups. There is too much of a sense of being separate than there is of being together.

SS: *Observing the evolution of Nepali sociology, two events appeared to me as really significant – one is the Colombo Plan, and the other one is the appearance of Gellner, I mean Ernest Gellner, coming up and shaping the discipline, thinking of a particular university system in which sociology could operate. How do you see these two references – one is that of European scholarship giving shape to a primary idea of a disciplinary engagement and a possibility based on the Colombo Plan on which depended the initial journey of Nepali college-level education and pedagogy that more or less entirely depended upon the Indian teachers, courses and Indian university affiliations. Even then when we look back to the disciplinary orientation, we realize that although India had such a significance in the making of the discipline where a lot of seniors like you and also a large number of other scholars have been trained in India, when eventually Nepali university system finally found a consolidation and made ways of dealing with the higher education system, the Indian appeal to a great extent remained invisible. However, the involvement of Gellner and others became much more significant.*

CM: With respect to Gellner, I don't think much happened. Gellner's son (David N. Gellner) is far more important. Ernest Gellner wrote a report just before we were sent out to India. As far as the Colombo Plan is concerned, it had a huge role in ultimately setting up TU, not only in terms of sociology and anthropology but in terms of other disciplines. It helped the university system run with Indian professors, Indian books, and also people like us, who went to India under that program and came back to teach here and work in the government.

In retrospect, I muse, was the Colombo Plan really an Indian thing or was it an American thing in itself? We went to India, and the Indians came to Nepal to teach, but was it something that sprouted from Indian society, Indian politics, or Indian government, or was it just pushed through American money? So, India was pushed along with it, rather than India pushing a South Asian imagination in itself. I am saying this, and I agree it was a huge intervention, but India did not follow it up and Nepal and other countries also did not invite India to do that because had it been something that really came out of India in a South Asian sense, even keeping up the dominance of India, India should have followed it up by mentoring us in a way, for some more years, or by exposing us to Indian culture like, say, the Americans do. We have a lively Fulbright program here. They invite us every week and ask us to go and talk to them. They follow that up. But that has not happened with respect to India. Neither has Nepal done anything about it. In fact, India could have started a small section within UGC that could have catered to Colombo Plan alumni, Indians, and Nepalis. Or, may be, have some Chairs or something in some universities.

SS: *That is a strong point. Thus, your take is that the way the Colombo Plan got executed and the way it disappeared, showed that it was not mooted out of South Asian imagination, nor by even a genuinely Indian attempt and so, probably, the legacy or collaboration did not continue. Thus, also it seemed like an Indian plan, behind the scenes it was an American project and more so an area studies project in that sense. Thus, what Leo Rose did to Nepal or Bhutan, or the entire Himalayas, the Colombo Plan did the same for Nepali higher education?*

CM: The Colombo Plan did a huge deal in all disciplines. In a sense, the debt that Nepal owes to India and to the Colombo plan is really so huge for my generation and the generation that preceded me. But it dissipated. Of course, you cannot expect everything to continue... but even political benefit that India could have drawn from this if it had kind of pursued a line that sought to expand connections with Nepal and with other countries that were a part of the Colombo Plan, its effect could have been immense.

SS: *Thank you, Prof. Misra.*

Interview of Youba Raj Luintel (YRL) By Swatahsiddha Sarkar (SS)[2]

SS: *How much and how far is South Asian sociology as a sociological construct possible to talk about, imagine, or ponder over? In the context of my understanding of Indian sociology and its focus on Nepal, I found that the Indian sociological imagination and its South Asian roots are very shallow. Nepal hardly appears in terms of pedagogy or courses pertaining to Indian sociology. Even with respect to other South Asian countries, it was never a mainstream trend in Indian sociology to study other cultures. In that respect, I was trying to*

2 The interview was conducted on March 2, 2021, at 6:06 GMT-8 via Google meet, also complemented by email response in July 2024.

figure out what could be your opinion, particularly based on your experience as a senior teacher and practitioner of the discipline in Nepal, as to how far you think India has figured in Nepali sociology as it is being taught or practiced in terms of research?

YRL: To me, South Asian sociology seems an idealist take in understanding the sociological practice within the region. The idea of "South Asia" itself is inherently a complex political-economic construct. Look at the various organizational endeavors undertaken by our governments, such as SAARC, SAFTA, the South Asian Food Bank, and the South Asian University. You are well aware of the performance of these organizations within the region. The same holds true for our disciplinary doldrums in terms of knowledge production and scholarly collaboration. Instead of South Asian sociology, let us focus the conversation on how we can sensibly understand the practice(s) of sociology in this region and in what way we can take initiatives in integrating the regional "sociologies" into our disciplinary learnings, leanings, frameworks, and exchanges. I believe our sociological practices are plagued by various challenges that not only prevent them from disciplinary collaborations but also isolate them from a multitude of issues that we all face and share. Our disciplinary imaginations have also been predominantly molded by the duplication of the import-based (except in very few cases) approaches for a very long time, where borrowing and sharing from localized experiences and traditions are somehow not preferred, both at the national and regional levels. Nonetheless, we can at least envision that it is conceivable to assess "sociologies" in the regional context.

Now, regarding your next concern, I agree that despite the discipline's history, scope, publication, and research in India being far older than in Nepal, sociology in/of India has had little influence on sociology in Nepal, and vice versa. Drawing on the phrase "sociological tradition" from Indian sociologist T. N. Madan, we may say that over time, practitioners in both countries surprisingly lost interest in learning and sharing from each other's "sociological traditions," even though both societies comprise so many common societal aspects and issues. Again, I don't intend to argue that we are completely dismissive of each other's professionals. I think, our sociology grew so preoccupied with Western schools, contacts, networks, and frameworks to the exclusion of various scholars and explorers from our region, their learning exchanges, and the works they generated. This has made it more discomfiting and difficult to envision external scholarships. What if both Nepal and India could learn from each other?

SS: *Out of my earlier discussions I have realized that although some of the pioneering Nepali sociologists got trained in India, they however went for their higher studies, mostly research, in the West. How do you see this trajectory? What I meant by South Asian sociology is not something very different from regional sociology and the fulcrum of this could be realized when we realize that the* sancta sanctorum *of any regional sociology—Latin American, African, South*

Asian, Asian, or Global South—lies not in the essentialized meaning of a region, but to realize that regional imagination has to grow via the micro-practices through which sociologies and sociologists from within the region indulge into respectful reciprocal scholarship with each other. Had there been the imagination of engaging with the Indian perspectives during the inception days of Nepali sociology, had there been a so-called South Asian imagination, things would have taken a different shape! I would be interested to know how you reflect on this. Again, this also gives a particular ground to say that the discipline was getting a viable nationalist anchorage. Would you agree with this that there is a nationalist orientation that has shaped Nepali sociology, as is the case in India? Do you consider that an impediment to talking about other countries, particularly that, speaking of other countries in sociological terms was directed and prioritized in terms of nationalist requirements? Do you think that would be able to lead towards a healthy practice of South Asian sociological imagination to evolve or not?

YRL: Let me start replying to you in this way: before 1959, the courses offered in Nepal for humanities and social sciences at the intermediate and bachelor degrees were nearly identical to the Indian syllabus. When TU was opened in 1959, the syllabus was shaped by Western contents mostly. The direction of the transition was driven by the various political tunes of the time and financial infusions from the donor community. To date, universities and the University Grants Commission's research and capacity-building endeavors are being financed by the World Bank. In the case of sociology, the first joint department of sociology and anthropology was opened up only after the 1980s.There are some areas where Indian sociology has had a certain influence, particularly during the initial phase of academic sociology in Nepal, say during the 1960s and the 1970s. From the vantage point of training, a few Nepali scholars (known to be the first-generation sociologists) were trained in India. Prof. Chaitanya Mishra, Prof. Ganesh Man Gurung, and Dr. Krishna Bhattachan (there are many more on the list), whether under the Colombo Plan or with the funding of the Government of Nepal, have that history. Prof G. S. Nepali, on the other side, who took retirement from Banaras Hindu University with a career of about four-decade of teaching in different Indian universities, resumed teaching and mentoring back in Nepal, at the then Central Department of Sociology/Anthropology for a decade or so (1988-1999).

All these had a certain influence on shaping the tradition of teaching and curricula-making at TU at that time. For instance, there were certain similarities between the Indian syllabus and the fundamental ideas of marriage, family, kinship, and caste, as well as their forms and natures, etc. Although our case served as the basis for the classroom discussions, the definitions once again relied on the works of Western sociologists. However, functionalism, or structural functionalism, became an accepted approach in Nepal through which these ideas and works were explored, much like sociology in India. However, when it came to challenging

the prevailing beliefs through dominant theories, these early-career sociologists championed Western theories, which were grounded in Western ontological and epistemological orientations, as they had been educated in the West.

Almost all textbooks used in the sociology syllabus here during the 1980s and the 2000s were by Indian sociologists. As the textbooks published in the US and the UK began to flood the market, and as the use of e-mail and the internet opened up the new possibility of accessing authentic academic resources of the original scholars at no time, the predominance of printed Indian textbooks shrank. As we revised our curriculum subsequently, the influence of Indian sociology that was there in Nepal's formal higher education setting originally got thinner. Now, we are heavily inclined toward Western sociology. It can be attributed to several factors. Note that the flow of sociologists (and social anthropologists) from the West has been quite high in Nepal (in tune with the bilateral and multilateral flow of "development funding"), whereas Indian sociologists visiting Nepal appear to be rare and exceptional. Perhaps the same applies to the flow of Nepali sociologists to India, compared to their flow to the USA and Europe. I got the opportunity to pursue my university education in Europe twice. It has implications we should note! Certain departments in a few universities in India have shown interest in Nepali society and culture, like the Sociology Department at BHU and the Centre for the Study of Nepal there, but their interest has been patchy and underfunded.

In such a context, sociologies of the West – their ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies —have certainly influenced the sociological imagination of the frontline sociologists in Nepal —both of the past and the present generations. Despite all these odds, I see a remote possibility of forging our efforts in making and advancing South Asian regional sociology. The time has come for every one of us to rebuild our homegrown sociology, grounded in our national vision and ethos, while also being historically informed and globally connected. This is one way of how regional sociologies can be shaped and promoted, and we can learn it from the Latin American case.

SS: *As you have commented how Nepali sociology is a carbon copy of Western sociology, let me bring in Alvin Gouldner who says that sociology, among all other social sciences, is most self-reflexive. In that regard I am curious to know why this self-reflexive stance of Nepali sociology did not make much impact? Why didn't it make much impact to indigenize Nepali sociology or to rethink Nepali sociology by pulling it out of the Euro-American intellectual grip? Did you find such discussions coming in?*

YRL: Note that Gouldner embraced three important strands in American sociology: he was critical, he was radical, and he loudly preferred subjective orientation. His *Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, and *Anti-Minotaur: The Myth of Value Free Sociology* vividly explicate his strands. The idea of reflexive sociology comes in that confluence. Unlike it, in our other regions and also in Nepal, Parsonian sociology

and his plea for empiricist account prevailed more till very recently. Structural-functionalism was in full swing here, and to an extent, it is still the case. Louis Dumont is the proto-type sociologist here – with due respect to his academic contributions. Still, I believe that if we could Nepalize the discipline of sociology, and if it gradually moves ahead and matures, it will pave the way for a self-reflexive stance in sociology in Nepal as well as in other parts of our region. For example, the co-edited volume, *Practices of Sociology in Nepal*, by Pranab Kharel and Gaurab KC (2021) illuminates the reflexive dialogue and focuses on the need for an alternative sociological practice in Nepal. We may have to wait for more such accounts in the future.

SS: *What do you think are the possible reasons for that?*

YRL: You are, of course, well aware of all of this, because the struggles persist on both sides, my circumstances and yours, in many ways. The social sciences are shrinking globally and the universities are facing many difficulties and losing their importance. We are part of it and in our case, numerous internal and external factors are at play. The pay we receive from the university is so low that it is impossible to consider research and publication and this has hindered our academic engagement and competitiveness with the West. Most importantly, the academic inkling and framework in Nepali sociology are mostly influenced by Western concepts, constructs, and approaches. Due to the large number of tough Western readings on our syllabus, students outside Kathmandu and whose English is not up to the par find it very difficult to make sense of those texts. The students coming outside from Kathmandu and whose English is below par face difficulties in institutionalizing the texts, as our syllabus is flooded with complex Western readings. As of yet, we have not developed a comprehensive plan for creating textbooks that would help those students overcome their challenges and revitalize their enthusiasm for the discipline. Donor financing has defined our work and keeps us primarily dependent on them for our research. Such a dependency perpetuates a focus on Western paradigms and imaginations making it harder to develop a unique self-reflective sociology.

SS: *Now can we put it this way that since there was already a lack of funds, and Nepali academia was heavily dependent on the West for this material part, hence the West channelized the best minds in reproducing their agenda? Can that stand as an argument?*

YRL: I wouldn't say the "best minds," but most of those, who were hand-picked, were chosen primarily from Kathmandu and coming from an English-speaking school. Here, the English became the major marker in sending them to Western institutions. Later, the trend shifted. But, it is clear that, after they got back home, a lot of them served as an interlocutor. Sociologically, they represented distinct groups or classes and positioned themselves in academia, consultancy business, and other domains, where they could make the most impact. Of course, they are famed and reputed. As a learned sociologist, you can self-evaluate our work. But on the other side, we also haven't made an effort to seek out the best minds.

Not only this, since the West was coming into the play, it also hijacked the potential issues according to their agenda and preferences and made certain issues more pertinent than they really were. The proliferation of issues pertaining to identity and Indigeneity, for example, and the peripheralization of other equally compelling issues like caste and class, or issues of diversity, issues of intra-caste and intra-ethnic subjugations are the cases in point.

SS: *So, you mean to say that the terms laid down by the funding agency also has had a huge impact in terms of, say, the Indigeneity questions and the like?*

YRL: There are generally three issues in this respect: a) People who had the opportunity to be trained in the West often used a Western lens upon their return, b) People who worked as research assistants of the Western scholars before transitioning to become donor representative (anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista is an example. The list can be added more), and c) Manipulation of research fund. Let me bring an example here. When David Cameron (from the conservative party) won the general election in 2010 in the UK displacing the Labour Party there, it had implications for the availability of research funds worldwide. DFID Nepal, in 2011 in some pretensions, withdrew its committed fund to NEFIN (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities) for evidence-based activism on identity and Indigeneity. Withdrawal of the fund as such had (partial) implications on the election in 2013 in the formation and representation structure of the second Constituent Assembly. There are numerous other examples of the un/availability of research funds for sociologically relevant issues in Nepal.

SS: *You are also associated with the Nepal Sociological Association (NSA) but I am not sure how far such initiatives have been undertaken by the NSA so far.*

YRL: I have been with NSA since its inception. As the common professional body of Nepali sociologists, NSA is a very recent institution. Its history goes back only to 2017. The NSA came into being after the joint professional body of Nepali sociologists and anthropologists— the Sociological and Anthropological Society of Nepal (SASON)—which had been formed in 1985. This crawling institution remained dormant with the split of sociology and anthropology at TU in 2015. Due to some disputes related to leadership and the *modus operandi*, the NSA fell into controversy since the beginning—a reason that has impeded its healthy growth. Anyway, the NSA is there and is somehow functioning.

In the last two international conferences that NSA organized (one in Kathmandu in 2019 and the other in Pokhara in 2023), we invited delegates and research papers from the Indian Sociological Society (ISS) as well as the Chinese Sociological Association (CSA) to create a space for academic dialogue and promote exchange and collaborations at the regional level. The Chinese colleagues participated in the 2019 conference with huge enthusiasm. Colleagues from India participated in both conferences and presented papers. We even held a panel discussion—how could regional sociology be imagined and propagated in this area? Both conferences remained productive and academically engaging. However, after the conferences

were accomplished, neither ISS, CSA nor NSA could follow it up. This has remained an unfulfilled agenda, but we will continue to pursue it.

SS: *Thank you so much Sir for your thoughtful interventions.*

Towards Conclusion

So far as the importance of these two interviews, in relation to the proposal of South Asian sociology is considered, are self-explanatory. As proposed earlier, they need no further elaboration and precisely that is why I will refrain from commenting upon them. However, I would like to clarify certain issues for the better comprehension of the readers. Firstly, that the proposal of South Asian sociology is neither anti-western nor nativistic, rather it is all for continuing a postcolonial sociological journey to chart out a "post-Western" sociological roadmap relying upon constant mutual learning, communication, and understanding between Western and non-Western sociology. Secondly, South Asian sociology is not to be considered as an extension of the Area Studies approach, rather it is just the opposite of Area Studies. South Asian sociology is not an assemblage of sociologies from South Asian countries. One needs to come out of the assumption that diversity and humanity are divided into a limited number of nation-states. Thirdly, although sociology as an academic discipline originated in the West, it also grew in non-Western societies through domestication. If by domestication we could build our respective national sociologies then it is quite feasible that regional imagination could be developed as one of the major facets of this domestication process in the high time of globalization. Last but not least, South Asian sociology is not a fiction of mind and is practically unrealizable.

If one is able to come out of his/her essentialist presumption of South Asia as a political and economic construct and starts concentrating on the micro-practices of our lifeworld, which is very much South Asian, one could sense that it is an achievable goal that could be realized even when there are institutional bottlenecks. Postgraduate and PhD dissertations by our students in the bordering regions (of either country) are quite feasible with minimum support from the parent intuition and collegial support from Indian/Nepali colleagues serving in a university or college in the bordering region can kick start South Asian sociology without much ado. All these would appear as a possibility only when we find time to self-reflect on our vocation and feel that the days of universal sociology have gone and the need is now to create pluriversal sociological discourses. Moreover, self-reflexive sociology is not American, though Gouldner did talk about it elaborately. Self-reflexivity is a humane quality that disciplinarians need to practice.

These interviews of two important sociologists from Nepal elicit different perspectives and, in each case, what seemed probable is the fact that dialogic sociology between practitioners of Nepal and India is very much welcome but somehow that is not firming up in any significant manner so that we can

expect the growth of seasoned South Asian sociological imagination among the sociologists from the region. Material support and institutional encouragement are obviously important factors (whose absence in some form was reiterated by both the scholars) but what is interesting to note is the fact that in contemporary times Indian scholars and Nepali scholars are working together in a common project but only in diaspora. Works by Ritodhi Chakraborty and Pasang Yangjee Sherpa (Chakraborty & Sherpa, 2021), and Mabel D Gergan (Chakraborty et al., 2021) or by Uma Pradhan and Indrajit Roy (Pradhan & Roy, 2006) are some such cases in point. Let us hope Indian sociologists and their Nepali colleagues and vice-versa, even when they are not in the diaspora, would develop such academic camaraderie to work conjointly on several projects to enrich the possibilities of South Asian sociology to grow in the near future.

Given these realities in hand, I strongly plead for the development of a dialogic space among sociologists across South Asia as the rudimentary step for building up South Asian sociological imagination. A space—imagined, physical, or virtual—that will ensure reciprocal scholarship provisioning sociologists to know each other's social realities and particular sociologies thereby augmenting the roadmap of a post-national sociology to emerge. The dialogic nature of this post-national sociology is to be informed by reciprocal respect for the sociological scholarship of each participating nation— be it India, Nepal, or any other South Asian country. However, it needs to be pointed out that the call for "post-national sociology" does not necessarily imply the "death" of nation-states. It is but a call for reorienting our disciplinary imagination in tune with the newly emerging forms of interaction between communities and cultures across state structures.

If sociological imagination (Mills, 1959) is about developing awareness regarding how personal experiences reconcile with the wider society or if it helps one realize the importance of recognizing how individual experience and worldview are products of both the historical context in which they sit and the everyday immediate environment in which an individual exists, then I must say this is high time that we should kick start the journey of doing sociology on a South Asian plane. In a sequel to this article, I would further argue, that the importance of seeing the connections between social structure and individual experience and agency in the South Asian context are many. For example, we do share similar kind of social structures—let's say caste—that were met with differential individual experiences and agency but we don't have a South Asian theory of caste. The humble plea that this write-up is intended to raise is: Let us imbibe it on our own before we are taught again by our Western colleagues that South Asian sociology does really mean a lot!

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