Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social Sciences

Paper No. 4: Sociology of South Asia - 1

M.A. (Total Credits: 04)

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Course Description

Broadly speaking, the sociology of South Asia refers to the discourses of sociology and social anthropology as well as to other disciplinary discourses such as history, subaltern studies, political science, economics etc that have attempted to map the society, culture and the politics of the region. In this sense, a sociological contextualization of South Asia is a multidisciplinary enterprise. This collective discourse on the region indicates that many aspects of South Asian society and culture are relatively well researched even though there continues to be some country and region-specific silences. The sociological enterprise in South Asia which began as a colonial intellectual and political tool has by now emerged as a multifaceted discourse by itself, and has some peculiarities of its own linked to the specific intellectual developments in the region in general, as well as in specific countries in South Asia which indicates both its strengths and weaknesses. This course will survey these developments from the beginning of the disciplinary history in the early part of the 20th century to about the 1980s on a thematic basis through a close reading of selected seminal texts. Most of these texts are from the discourse of formal sociology and social anthropology while some will be from related disciplines which have informed the sociology of the region. The survey will focus on ethnographic descriptions as well as their theoretical underpinnings and specific research orientations at different periods of time (the themes not covered in this course will be addressed in Sociology of South Asia 2). The course is designed as an extensive survey of literature in the context of which students are expected to read a number of recommended texts and discuss them each week in class with the course instructor which will be supplemented with lectures and a series of films.

The suggested readings contain an extensive list of possible texts. The course instructor will select a series of texts from each section that will become compulsory texts for the course each time it is offered.

Course Structure

1) The ‘implantation’ of sociology/social anthropology in South Asia and the issues, characteristics and problems of the Sociology of South Asia: Sociology and social anthropology emerged out of two distinct conditions and related intellectual traditions in Europe, namely the process of industrialization and urbanization and their resultant consequences (sociology) and the colonization of what is now being called the Third World (social anthropology). It is these disciplines that were implanted in the South Asia region in the context of colonialism(s). In the process of implanting these disciplines and their subsequent expansion, radical transformations
occurred localizing the disciplines while also retaining some of their ‘universal’ characterizing features. This section will explore these phenomena in detail under the following sub-themes:

- Localization dynamics and politics.
- The debate between the local and the ‘universal’ in sociology.
- Merging of disciplinary borders between social anthropology and sociology, and their contestations.
- The sociology of India: Schools of thought and research, theoretical orientations, politics.
- The sociology of Sri Lanka: Schools of thought and research, theoretical orientations, politics and absences.
- The sociology of Pakistan: Schools of thought and research, theoretical orientations, politics.
- The sociology of Bangladesh: Schools of thought and research, theoretical orientations, politics.
- The sociology of Nepal: Schools of thought and research, theoretical orientations, politics.
- The sociology of Bhutan, Afghanistan and the Maldives: Schools of thought and research, theoretical orientations, politics.

Suggested Readings


Articles under the title ‘For a Sociology of India’, Contributions to Indian Sociology (Old series and New series).

2) The study of religion and ritual in South Asia: Since Emile Durkehim and Max Weber laid the foundations for the formal study of religion within sociology, many other influential theoretical inputs into the study of religion have taken place which includes the work of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and psycho analysis, the work of Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner and others. Many of these have also influenced how sociologists have attempted to study religion and how the phenomenon has been intellectually ‘packaged’ in the region as in the construction of composite categories such as ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Buddhism’ out of varied local practices. While religion in certain senses is well researched in the region, there continue to be absences and silences, particularly with reference to what may be called non-dominant religious practices. In this section, the history of the theoretical engagement with religion in general and in the region in particular will explored while paying particular attention to the following sub-themes:

- Studies of ‘other’ religious practices in the region.
- Silences in the study of religion in South Asia.
- Politics and politicization of religion in South Asia.

Suggested Readings


3) Exploring the politics of identity and representation in South Asia: tribal/indigenous categories, caste, class and notions of individuality: Understandings of identity is a crucial aspect of human existence which has become a significant object of exploration within the sociology of South Asia as indicated by the interest in issues such as caste, tribal/indigenous categories, individuality etc in the works of M.N. Srinivas, Ronald Inden, Louis Dumont, Bryce Ryan, Mattson Mines and many others. This section will explore some of the theoretical issues that underpin the study of identity in general, and the manner in which these studies have evolved in the region paying particular attention to the following sub-themes:

- The politics of representation: ‘Tribal Studies’ and being ‘tribal’ or ‘indigenous’ in South Asia.
- Caste and issues of collective and individual identity: Moving beyond ‘Homo Hierarchicus’.
- Surveying the studies of caste in India, Sri Lanka and Nepal.
- Individuality and individualism in South Asia in the context of caste.

Suggested Readings


**4) Kinship and marriage in South Asia:** Kinship and marriage are two phenomena that have interested sociologists and social anthropologists for a considerable period of time. However, as sustained intellectual and theoretical interest and debates in these issues emerged in Europe since the 1950s, South Asia became an area where many of these ideas were explored in the context of fieldwork. As such, an extensive corpus of literature has emerged on the subject focused on the region. Kinship and marriage remains an important area of study in sociology, particularly in the context of understanding local politics and economic structures. Paying attention to the theoretical concerns that sustained this interest historically, this section will survey some of this literature paying attention to the following sub-themes:

- Studies of kinship and marriage in South Asia: patterns of marriage, patters of residence and theoretical implications.
- The social and political relevance of kinship and marriage.
- Economics of kinship ties and marriage alliances.

**Suggested Readings**


05. Agrarian systems, irrigation and land in South Asia: Sociology of South Asia has paid considerable attention to issues of agrarian systems, irrigation and land within what may be called an overriding interest in political economy. Most parts of the region have inherited from its past complex systems of agriculture and irrigation as well as patterns of land tenure. This section will briefly focus on agrarian systems and management of irrigation systems in the past, and their transformation in recent times as well as the impact contemporary conditions have brought upon traditions of land tenure linked to issues such as marriage, caste and power. An exploration of recent irrigated agriculture settlement schemes and their dynamics will also be undertaken in this section. The following sub-themes will be the focus of this exploration:

- Traditional systems of agriculture, Irrigation and issues of land.
- Transformation of agrarian and irrigation systems within emerging systems of political economy.
- Land ownership, land tenure, marriage, power and local politics.
- Political economies of contemporary irrigated agriculture.

Suggested Readings


Joshi, P.C. 1974. ‘Land Reform and Agrarian Change in India and Pakistan since 1947’. In, The Journal of Peasant Studies (Chapter: 1, 2 and 3).


**Modes of Evaluation**

There will be three different evaluations as part of a continuous evaluation system: 1) Mid Semester Examination (20%), 2) Post-midterm paper(s) (40%), and 3) End Semester Examination (40%). Students are expected to clear the term-paper topics with the course instructor within the first six weeks of the course.