

**Report from the South Asia Sociology Workshop II (SAW II)
Indian Sociological Society and Swedish South Asian Studies Network**

Prospects for Collaborative Research in South Asia

Rajhans, Surajkund, 22-23 December 2005

Staffan Lindberg

This was the second meeting of South Asian sociologists within a year made possible through a Planning Grant from SASNET. It had been organised by the Indian Sociological Society through Prof. Ravinder Kaur, Prof. Partha Mukherji and the staff of the Society in New Delhi.

In the first SAW meeting 23-25 February there were about 40 participants discussing ‘The State of Sociology: Issues of Relevance and Rigour’ (see Report – [link](#)). The meeting decided to form an interim group to work on the establishment of a South Asia sociological association and to hold this second meeting on possible joint research projects before the end of December 2005. The meeting should also discuss a draft of a constitution of a sociological association.

Here at SAW II, there were in principle 2 researchers from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and 4 others including myself. The Nepalese had not participated in SAW I because they could not leave the country right after the royal coup on 1 February.

The first day of the meeting was spent in presenting and discussing the six research proposals prepared in advance. The second day we discussed the possibilities for a joint research programmes and the formation of a South Asian sociological association.

Prof. André Beteille chaired the first three sessions of the workshop.

1.

Want, vulnerability, exclusion and an appropriate poverty reduction strategy for South Asia
By Nazrul Islam and S. Aminul Islam, Bangladesh

‘The issue of measurement is no longer the central issue in poverty research. The key task now is to understand the social cultural and ecological processes that produce risk, vulnerability and negative livelihood outcomes. Particularly important is the issue of life cycle crisis that generate downward mobility and poverty.’

This proposal emphasizes the need to incorporate the understanding that the new poverty analysis has brought forward in Western Europe and Latin America. There are two central concepts in this: pauperization as a result of globalisation and lack of social capital.

The proposal led to a very interesting discussion. It was pointed out that existing poverty studies and indices were confined to economics, education and health and that sociology could contribute a much broader perspective. In addition to economic structure and patterns of employment and exploitation of labour there are a host of other factors, social, political, cultural and environmental, which also co-determine poverty and well-being. Natural calamities like floods, erosions, climatic change and pollution have a major influence, just as

the demography of life-courses and family situation – a young couple with many children is more vulnerable; the nightmare of old people with no sons to take care of them.

Downward mobility is also an important cause of poverty. For example, when formal industries close down due to hard competition and are reopened as small informal workshop units, where labour laws do not apply, labourers suffer a huge loss of income and job safety.

Global mass media and consumer culture has entered into everyday lives of people and impact on consumption patters which may cause malnutrition and lack of fulfilment of basic needs. There are also important aspects of subjective definitions and feelings of relative deprivation in people's understanding of poverty, well-being and quality of life. These may vary between different communities as may social capital to avoid or get out of poverty.

Politics also affect the development of poverty and well-being in a major way. Public health, education, welfare and employment schemes have strong importance for alleviation of poverty, but often leave considerable sections without these facilities.

Broad studies in different regions could identify risks and vulnerable groups and thus create better instruments for policy making.

We also discussed the various donor and NGO approaches to poverty in recent times. Here non-economic concepts and understandings have entered to a certain extent. But the problem with these concepts is that they are project-generated and do not reflect structures and opportunities in a holistic way. Moreover, projects come and go, and so do the donor terminology.

2.

Towards a Sociology of Poverty in South Asia: A Proposal for a Comparative Study of Social and Cultural Dimensions of Poverty and Emerging Poverty Trends in Selected South Asian Countries

By Tudor Silva and Siri Hettige, Sri Lanka

This proposal also started with the premise that existing poverty studies are economy oriented and donor driven. Sociological variables are missing to a large extent.

The proposed project has the following objectives:

1. Identify and evaluate sociological factors associated with poverty – cultural attributes, social stratification, social stratification, ethnicity, religion, gender, caste, age and marital status, intergenerational factors and community dimensions.
2. Develop Sociological concepts and approaches to analyse poverty and its development over time.
3. Assess the social impact of poverty, including the relationship between poverty and social conflict.
4. Understand processes and pathways of exit poverty and while many fail to do so.
5. Identify and recommend a policy framework best suited to minimize poverty.
6. Identify ways of cooperation between South Asian countries in areas such as teaching and research.

The project would create a network of researchers all over South Asia, starting with determining the focus of the project and the basic concepts to be applied. Before country studies were launched there would be a literature survey and review of secondary data. Country studies would consist of both quantitative and qualitative studies.

The proposition envisages an ambitious common sociological data base on poverty for South Asia. The question of funding was discussed. SAARC has set aside 100 million US dollar for a poverty reduction programme, but it may take time before funds can be released. Several agencies, like DFID only give funds for country studies. One task would be to identify donors giving regional support.

It was also noted that the proposal would leave considerable room for specialised case studies, like, for example, of suicides related to poverty, of relative deprivation and the impact of violent conflicts, war and natural disasters.

The discussion of this proposal was in many ways similar to the one reported above. Some additional points were that there should be an emphasis on the reproduction and change of poverty patterns, including inter-generational changes.

Summing up so far, the two proposals discussed had similar focus and were found to be of considerable interest. They could generate substantial research results as well as South Asian concepts and sociological imagination.

3.

Studying some Indicators of Gross National Happiness

Dorji Penjore and Karma Galay, Bhutan

This study from the Centre for Bhutan Studies (CBS) is already under way, and reflects underlying values about social development in Bhutan, synthesised in the conception of 'happiness'. The index called 'development index' is, however, to be based on neutral observations and should include the following dimensions:

- * Living standard
- * Health of population
- * Education
- * Eco-system vitality and biodiversity
- * Cultural vitality and diversity
- * Time use and balance
- * Good governance
- * Community vitality
- * Emotional wellbeing

The CBS scholars are keen to interact with South Asian scholars in developing simple but effective indications of the various dimensions to be measured and evaluated. They are already in communications with scholars in Canada and USA, and would probably gain also from interaction with northwest European and Scandinavian attempts to develop welfare indices.

So far, however, scholars they had contacted in India took no or little interest in their index. Whether due to the almost “professional pessimism” of intellectuals in India or a more general scepticism of especially positive values in the social sciences, this nevertheless reflects a rather sad lack of scientific self-understanding. No research is without value foundation, whether recognised or not - what makes the activity into science is the rigour and conceptual clarity applied and the use of empirical observation that can be cross-checked. Maximisation of individual happiness is, for example, the basic value in the utilitarian philosophy underlying seemingly objective neo-classical economics. Positive well-fare, good health, etc. are values underlying social welfare research in industrialised countries. Poverty, exploitation, discrimination, oppression, etc. are negative “values” in the same vein underlying much social science research.

So the production, distribution and consumption of material goods and services underlying economic studies of poverty is one way of defining happiness/well-fare and poverty, while additional sociological/social science dimensions are part of a broader approach. The Bhutan attempt clearly falls within the latter. It should be fruitful to have this as one very substantial contribution in the research programme on poverty suggested by the Sri Lankan and Bangladesh scholars.

The Bhutan scholars announced that they were going to organise a Culture and Media Conference on 14 – 16 March 2006.

4.

Role of Civil Society in Ensuring Human Security

By Anwar Shaheen, Pakistan

This proposal is about the latest of UN concepts, human security, and the two strategies suggested to ensure it:

1. Protection from critical and pervasive threats and dangers (risk to life, property, repute, job, children, family, etc.
2. Empowerment through full development of development of human potential and participation in decision making.

Human security as a concept means the right to life, a decent living standard, education, health, property etc. Factors that endanger these rights are multiple. Political aspects concern violent conflicts, post-conflict situations, arms proliferation, etc. Another aspect concerns environmental factors which may endanger people’s lives such as natural disasters, pollution of water, soil and air.

‘The state cannot provide social protection to all in all situations, while civil society can generate pressures, communicate concerns, and launch its advocacy campaigns. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) can also provide for a major volume of support. NGOs have been acknowledged as “a visible, credible, and accountable force in advancing human security.” There remains a need to clarify this role of the NGOs along with other components of the civil society within the framework of protection and empowerment, and also beyond that. ...

The proposed study would particularly focus on the following aspects of the subject:

1. Identifying various dimensions of human security relevant for action by the civil society organisations;
2. Reviewing the present role of civil society regarding human security;
3. Analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the civil society's role and reasons behind them;
4. Enlisting priority areas of action for civil society organizations; and
5. Chalking out a program for effective desired change in social policy, legislations, service delivery, etc. to ensure maximum human security.'

The study would be based in sociological perspectives but also look at the wider context and try to create an integrated model.

In the discussion many of the issues involved were discussed and clarified.

In Pakistan, the security issues are rampant and affect ordinary people in a multitude of ways. For example, women feel insecure both in public and at home (rape is a common phenomenon and practically unpunished). There is a lot of sectarian violence between religious groups, violence in tribal areas, etc. Unexpectedly, it seems, migration often implies insecurity for those left behind, since many of the migrants do not remit any resources back home! A family without the income of its main breadwinner is extremely insecure.

The aim is to look into the institutional, cultural and environmental framework of human security. It focuses on the role of civil society, especially when the state is seen as a risk to security through war, civil war, state terror, collaboration with criminal elements, lenience towards sectarian violence, violence related to big infrastructural development projects, etc.

In many South Asian countries and regions it is the local community, neighbourhood, etc., which provide security in wake of the failure of the police, army and state to ensure it. Many communities are gated today, not just the super rich. Subject to natural disasters in such societies, people also turn to their own local community for relief and rehabilitation.

Even in societies where the state does function to some extent, the civil society may be crucial in ensuring human security. The aim is to map and analyse the ways that the civil society does function in relation to human security, especially the role of Civil Society Organisation (CSO) and NGOs. The aim is also to suggest priorities and ways of action to improve human security, and to suggest desired changes in social policy, legislations, service delivery, etc. on part of the state.

We also discussed the character of NGOs, the fact that most of them are 'externally constructed civil societies' mostly by domestic or foreign state agencies or so called international NGOs, as was explained by Partha Mukherji. In this way they have other agendas than people and local communities and they don't deal with people as members in an accountable democratic organisation. Thus, civil society is much more than NGOs of whatever fashion. Civil society in relation to human security needs to be studied in its entirety.

5.

Violent Conflict and Minorities in South Asia

By Krishna Bhattachan and Mukta S. Lama-Tamang, Nepal

The aim of this project is thus to study the relationships between minorities, lack of rights, deprivation, etc. and violent conflicts. Considerable work has already gone into this field of study, but much remains to be done.

“Research objectives

The broad objective of the research is to build and understanding of phenomenon of violent conflicts in relation to minorities in the South Asian context. Specific objects include:

1. Build a comparative perspective on commonalities and difference between South Asian countries on conflict and minorities through specific case studies.
2. Develop South Asian perspective(s) on minorities through understanding violent conflict including the role of state and non-state actors.
3. Understand how violent conflicts engage and impact minorities in the different parts of the region.
4. Find out ways to prevent it in the future and its implications for restructuring and/or re-conceptualizing and/or re-imagining the state and democracy.
5. Generate South Asian concept(s)/theory(ies)/methodology on conflict and minorities.’

There should be one team in each country. Team leaders will form a South Asian Research Team. Besides country reports, there will be a joint comparative report.

Discussion:

The proposal provides arguments for the important distinction between regional ethnic minorities, such as clearly defined nationalities with their own language and culture and tribal groups in a defined territory, and minorities such as castes found everywhere in society and without a territory of their own. The latter can be religious groups, Dalits, backward castes, etc. In all of these cases we are dealing with hierarchies, segmentation and various forms of exploitation, discrimination and oppression, but minorities with a base in a territory clearly stand out in terms of demand linked to autonomy or secession.

Another issue is violence. We are dealing with structural inequalities, latent or open conflicts, but not always violent. The proper enquire is therefore into either:

- a. Regional ethnic minorities and conflicts
- b. Cultural/ethnic minorities and conflicts

Processes behind a. are very often various forms of nation building after independence. There is a great deal of difference between this process in India and in the other countries of South Asia. It appears as if Indian federalism has managed to accommodate sub-nationalist claims to autonomy and statehood better than its neighbours. Even so India has a multitude of ethnic conflicts not least in Assam and northern West Bengal.

Processes behind b. are related to the democratic processes in the various countries and the struggle for emancipation of traditionally subordinated segments in the colonial social formation. When castes are mobilised around land reforms, permission to enter temples, positive discrimination/affirmative action, etc. they also provoke reactions among privileged groups who risk loosing their advantage.

Thus, in the discussion we were able to identify two different fields of enquiry, both of them worthy of research programmes.

6.

Globalising Economy and Society: Rural Social Mobility in South Asia

By Partha Nath Mukherji and Bibhuti Mohanty, India

It is time to take stock of the economic globalisation that has reached South Asia in the last one and a half decade. Statistics indicate both that income disparities are widening between and within countries and that absolute income is rising for most strata in Asia. At the same time little is known about the impact on rural society and various groups within it. This globalisation is technology driven and not possible to reverse, while its forms should be negotiable with the new strength that South Asia as an emergent central world economic region possesses.

It is proposed to launch a comparative social mobility study in South Asia based on classical sociological theoretical and methodological understandings, for example, developed by Sorokin. In this tradition 'social mobility is understood (as) any transition of an individual, or social object, or value from one social position to another.'

The study would be built around five basic asymmetric domains within society which synthesize how societies are variously stratified, hierarchicised and differentiated:

1. **Discrimination** – social relationships that are legitimated by social norms. In classical sociological theory, this is related to *status* as developed by Max Weber.
2. **Exploitation** – unequal economic exchange resulting in differential distribution of material and other resources. *Class* in Weber's and Marx' terminology.
3. **Oppression** – control and exercise of *power*.
4. **Gender relations** – configures with the above domains but has a distinct structural identity.
5. **Eco-environmental relations** between humankind and physical nature.

By repeatedly studying how individuals and groups have fared along these five dimensions it would possible to substantiate different trajectories of mobility or standstill positions. For the first study there could be focus on respondents aged 50 and above (men and women), who could also provide data about their parents' generation as well as about their offspring generation.

The suggestion is to construct a survey on the basis of these five theoretical domains. The survey should be carried out on samples similar to the NSS in India, that is, substantial number of interviews in various regions and populations. In addition more qualitative case studies should be undertaken to give life to the 'bones' provided by the survey.

A suitable group of fieldworkers could be school teachers, who are already trained to take census at regular intervals.

Everybody realised the size of this undertaking and the amount of money involved. It would come about only if adequate funding was forthcoming.

We discussed if it would be possible to construct a composite index of mobility. Mukherji and Mohanty had thought of this as possibility but left it open to the actual empirical investigation and its result.

Another issue of great importance is migration, not least to urban areas and its importance for rural livelihoods. This aspect would only be studied here via those households still residing in the rural area but with members which have gone for work elsewhere.

We also discussed more theoretical issues, like a comparison with Bourdieu's different forms of capital (economic, social and cultural) and how they could be related to the proposed study.

Another issue is the very conceptualisation of globalisation and the possibility to link various forms of social mobility and social transformations to this process. Economic globalisation in terms of global competition and foreign investments, etc. may have begun in 1991, but in many respects it has not yet reached every nook and corner of the continent and its people. In other respects globalisation in the form mass media and consumption has had a longer gestation period and now pervades almost everywhere.

Everybody appreciated the proposal for its thrust and ambition. It was agreed that it could be linked to the research theme on poverty and vulnerability.

7.

In Wet and Dry – 25 years of Change in Rural South India

By Staffan Lindberg

This was a presentation of an ongoing panel study of 240 agricultural households in 6 villages in Trichy and Karur districts which were interviewed 25 years ago.¹ Three of the villages belong to a canal irrigated area along the river Kaveri, which we call wet villages and three of the villages belong to a dry rain-fed area, which we call dry area. In 1979-80 this area was already deep into the green revolution with increasing employment and incomes. In the wet area there had been land reform and in the dry there had been an increase in well irrigation, both being important for the success of the application of the new high yielding crop technology.

On our return we find that both the wet and the dry area have undergone significant change when it comes to agricultural technology and mechanisation, increase in non-agricultural occupations and improved social welfare. Women have started to work outside agriculture in factories and services. The decentralisation of the political system to the Panchayat and Panchayat Union level has led to more political activities and the entrance of women into politics. However, an important factor in the ongoing economic and social transformation is the increasing scarcity of water in both the wet and the dry area.

The presentation evoked several comments and a lively discussion about the usefulness of panel studies of this type for the study of social transformation. It was pointed out that the use of an inter-generational approach in studying social mobility was very important.

¹ The study is undertaken by Venkatesh B. Athreya, M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation, and Bharathidasan University; Göran Djurfeldt, Staffan Lindberg, Lund University; A. Rajagopal, SaciWATERS; and R. Vidyasagar. The study is sponsored by Sida SAREC and the Swedish Research Council.

Several comments related to the social transformation in Tamil Nadu and that such change could not be seen in Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Nepal in the last 25 years. Also the difference between the wet and dry areas was pointed out as a more universal feature, with the dry areas lagging behind. But labour migration within the country could actually change the pattern. It was also noted that women everywhere seem to have the same problem in entering politics, especially Dalit women. Regarding discrimination somebody pointed out the glaring difference between material progress and remaining discrimination. An example: when Mr. Jagjivam Ram, one of the top Congress leaders in the 1970s, used to visit his native village he would be served food in separate utensils since he was a Dalit!

Some comment related to the water issue and the likelihood that this would soon become the main problem in rural South Asia.

The discussion ended with suggestion that we form a thematic group around social transformation studies with panel data as the main approach.

8.

Towards a common proposal: Substantive and methodological issues

The discussion started with the question if there should be one or more research projects to be initiated by this workshop. There were some voices for one big programme but the majority favoured a more decentralised approach, in which we could initiate several projects, seek separate funding and hope that at least some of the projects could take off early.

A major research project with substantial results would give legitimacy to a South Asian association, so it would be important not to try “to chew” more than we could carry out. As an example, a comparative project on gender in the South Asian countries was cited. This study had been undertaken by the Indian Social Studies Trust and had yielded very interesting results. It had been duly noted by the media and research institutions.

Centre for Bhutan Studies was already launching its ‘development index’ and had the funding for that, so that study would take off under all circumstances.

A new theme was suggested by Inayatullah: the development of Sociology in the South Asian countries.

We also discussed the various funding possibilities from Ford Foundation, DFID, World Bank, EC, etc., but since we did not yet have any proposals it would be difficult to start exploring the various opportunities.

Finally we agreed that we would try to get the following thematic research groups started in order to develop new research projects:

1. Poverty and Social Development Studies (PSDS):

Collect data for social mobility studies, interact with GNH index, look at secondary data, construct an alternative index if possible and propose a comparative study on that basis.

Coordinator: **Tudor Silva**

Other members: Karma Galay, Dorji Penjore, Aminul Islam, Partha Mukherji, Bibhuti Mohanty

2. Social Transformation Studies – SASTRA:

Try to devise a programme for the collection and study of regional primary and secondary panel data which can give rich evidence in social transformation studies.

Coordinator: **Siri Hettige**

Other members: Ravinder Kaur, Staffan Lindberg, Anwar Shaheen

3. Regional Ethnic Minorities and Conflicts (REMAC)

Coordinator: **Krishna Bhattachan**

Other members: Mukta Lama, John Kattakayam, Aminul Islam, Tudor Silva

4. The Development of Sociology in South Asia (DOSA)

Coordinator: **Nazrul Islam**

Other members: John Kattakayam, Inayatullah

The coordinators would report to the next SAW meeting, which preliminary would take place in Sri Lanka in connection with the conference ‘Democracy and Development’ on 21-23 August, to be arranged by Prof. Siri Hettige and associates.

9.

The formation of an association for South Asian sociologist

An interim working group, consisting of Nazrul Islam, Siri Hettige, Ravinder Kaur and Partha Mukherji had prepared a draft of a constitution, which was lively discussed.

It was decided that the name of the association should be the **South Asian Sociological Society (SASS)** and that it should be open to all with an interest in sociology. With South Asian society is meant the eight countries now included in SAARC. Membership fee would be set at Rs. 1000 for four years with a special fee open for students at Rs. 250.

The purpose of the society would be to provide a forum for sociologists in the region to promote and foster collaborative activities in such areas as research, publications, teaching, and curriculum development. A major aim is to develop South Asian sociological concepts and theoretical and methodological perspectives.

The Society should organise a conference and a general meeting at least once in four years. It should set up a website and publish newsletters and a regular journal for the spreading of new research results in the region.

A governing council with representatives from all the member countries will be elected for a period of four years. The country representative will also act as a coordinator for that country.

Finally, it was decided to submit the revised draft of a constitution to the next SAW meeting in Sri Lanka in August, expecting that meeting to form the society.

List of participants

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A session at the South Asia Sociology Workshop II at Surajkund, India 22-23 December 2005. Staffan Lindberg, Department of Sociology, Lund University, Tudor Silva, Head of the Dept. of Sociology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka, Mukta S. Lama-Tamang, SAGUN Kharpachowk VDC, Kathmandu, and Inayatollah, Council of Social Sciences, Islamabad.



(From left) Prof. Inayatollah (Pakistan), Prof. S. Aminul Islam and Prof. Nazrul Islam (Bangladesh), and Prof. Tudor Silva (Sri Lanka).



Informal talk at the South Asia Sociology Workshop II at Surajkund, India 22-23 December 2005. Mukta S. Lama-Tamang, SAGUN Kharpachowk VDC, Kathmandu, Staffan Lindberg, Department of Sociology, Lund University, Krishna Bhattachan, Central Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, and Siri Hettige, Dept. of Sociology, University of Colombo.



South Asian Sociologists 2nd meeting in Delhi, December 2005. Prof. Ravinder Kaur and Prof. Partha N Mukherji