

“Names Can Wait”: The Misnaming of the South Asian Diaspora in Theory and Practice

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I love the word “desi.” It is so beautiful. I can go around saying it over and over again. I’m of the view that it is the best word to describe ourselves . . . We who use it do not hearken back to the “homeland” of the subcontinent, because we are generally not nationalistic in that sense. Our homeland is an imaginary one . . .

—Vijay Prashad, “Smashing the Model Minority Myth”

Without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side, the baby’s birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true. . . . He needs to be fed and blessed, to be given some gold and silver, to be patted on the back after feedings and held carefully behind the neck. Names can wait.

—Jhumpa Lahiri, *The Namesake*

This special topic issue of the *South Asian Review* is intended as a starting point in a dialogue about the nature of what might be termed “South Asian literary studies,” a subfield caught between the conventional area studies category, “South Asian studies,” and the emerging, interdisciplinary rubric of “postcolonial studies.” The context is presumed to be the western academy, and perhaps the North American academy in particular, though certainly a point that needs to be considered is how categories such as “South Asianness” are perceived within universities in South Asia itself. As a rhetoric of identity, “South Asian” is an important corrective to nationalistic thinking, but it is weakly supported by the long history of the Indian subcontinent, and it is damaged by the lingering animosity that accompanied South Asia’s “birth” at Partition (the “parturition of

partition,” as it were), as well as its early history in the western academy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, “South Asian” has greatest weight in the context of diasporic communities, but even there the term has had a complex life, as illustrated in Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel, *The Namesake*, where the second-generation protagonist Gogol Ganguli struggles with a sense of namelessness on the one hand and what might be thought of as nominal overdetermination on the other. Gogol’s struggles with naming, I argue, might be seen as emblematic of the nominal crisis that prevails in the diasporic community to which he belongs. “South Asian,” in short, is a term widely used, and perhaps ideologically necessary, but it cannot be said that the term is used with great comfort by those who deploy it. Indeed, insofar as it is used sociologically, it may be that to be called “South Asian” is to always be subject to a misnomer—to be subject to what Gayatri Spivak has described using a term from ancient Greek poetics, “catachresis”: “South Asian” is the name used when there is no proper name (Spivak 141).

Catachresis in *The Namesake*

Lahiri’s novel represents—perhaps definitively—the experiences of a particular, emergent ethnic community. But which community? The community to which I am referring has no name that is not clunkily sociological or somehow pejorative. Sociologically, they are second-generation South Asian immigrants, or South Asian Americans, though only a limited number of people thus identified regularly use these terms to describe themselves.¹ Second-generation immigrants are often called ABCD’s (American Born Confused Desis), while the ABCD’s themselves have referred to recent immigrants as “Fobs” (Fresh Off the Boat).

Eschewing both pejoratives and the labels derived from sociology, the critic Vijay Prashad has attempted to simplify and unify diasporic identities by appropriating the in-group name *desi*, for formal academic discourse. In his book, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, Prashad generally deploys *desi* to refer to South Asians sociologically and culturally. Anecdotally, it can be confirmed that many diasporic South Asians, who may or may not have read Prashad’s work, have long used this word as a community marker, irrespective of when they immigrated or whether they are immigrants at all. Among the various communities that recognize the term, *desi* may work, but it remains a name like a Bengali *daknam* (pet name), a name used around the house rather than recognized by a broader public (*bhalonam*).² With Prashad, the formal usage of *desi* throughout his book leads to a certain ambiguity regarding his intended audience; it is unclear whether *The Karma of Brown Folk* is a general sociological treatise on the emergence of a South Asian American cultural politics, or whether it is in effect an *in-*

group text, written by a progressive *desi*, whose use of the term might limit its audience, potentially reifying—through linguistic exclusion—the very culturalism it claims to critique. This ambiguity is present from the beginning of Prashad’s text, as he provisionally embraces *desi* as an “unalloyed” cultural identity:

Given other circumstances, I would have much rather addressed this book to an unmarked human subject, who is like the Subject of so much European philosophy, but such a choice is not available as long as ‘race’ continues to be a searing category through which we are so habitually forced to live. . . . The resilience of race in our lives cannot be easily dismissed in favor of an imputed universalism, since we might want to allow those who fight from standpoints of oppression to come from concrete identities . . . to produce forms of unity that can only be seen in struggle rather than in some abstract theoretical arithmetic. Most notions of identity are not unalloyed, and many celebrate the importance of the politics of identification; we must learn to harness these identifications in the hope of a future rather than denying the right of oppressed peoples to explore their own cultural resources toward the construction of a complex political will. (ix-x)

Here, Prashad is arguing that that racialized markers of identity among “oppressed peoples” can and should be accepted by progressive intellectuals and activists, even if the latter do not personally share the unalloyed sense of identity in question. Unfortunately, however, the idea of a constructed identification with authentic ethno-racial group can be deeply problematic, as Prashad’s own investigations of religious fundamentalisms in various diasporic communities might illustrate. Moreover, *desi* has its own problematic limits, which cannot be merely overlooked in the interest of an activist agenda. Dravidian languages, for instance, do not have the word *desi*, thus potentially limiting the recognition or usefulness of the term even within South Asia. Various South Indian communities have resisted the hegemony of North Indian languages since the 1950s, and this animus against Hindi and other north Indian languages can also extend to the word *desi*. South Asians from South India—and Sri Lanka—might therefore insist on articulating the “construction of a complex political will” in their own idiom or, perhaps, in English.³ Moreover, Prashad leaves more or less unexamined the fraught concepts of “unalloyed” racial and cultural identity that are presupposed by *desi*. Are persons of mixed heritage, for instance, also *desi*? What about individuals of European descent who have lived, or are currently living, in South Asia, or otherwise have a strong investment in South Asian cultural forms? At the limits of *desi* identity, it becomes clear that the term, which at times seems to be more indicative of “race” than it is of “culture,” is as potentially limiting as the names it is designed to replace. What is needed is an

approach to naming that remains open to the possibility that authentic cultural identity will always remain a vanishing object.

As a side note, it seems worth pointing out that the struggle with naming in South Asian diaspora communities might be seen to echo that of African Americans, who have as a community also struggled with a series of public names, most of them interpellated rather than chosen: “colored,” “Negro,” “black,” “African American,” the highly diluted “people of color,” and the hybrid derogatory/pet name “nigger/nigga.” The points of comparison are interesting and potentially very compelling, but beyond the scope of this particular essay.⁴ To the extent that the experience of African American naming and self-naming has been difficult, however, it seems that the struggle to name the diasporic community, and of naming within the community, will be a long and difficult road.

The great conceit of Lahiri’s novel is that her Gogol, the ambassador of a community without a name, is himself misnamed. His parents legally give him the surname of the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol as a first name in the Massachusetts hospital where he is born. The name is chosen with the understanding that it is merely a formality, and will in time become just a pet name, because at the moment the grandmother’s letter, on which the ritually selected Hindu name was written, was lost somewhere in the mail from Calcutta. Gogol, the name of his father’s favorite writer, goes on the birth certificate and stays with him in his early school years. His family does later give him a proper name, Nikhil, but it is an afterthought and does not stick. As he goes to college, Gogol wants to redefine himself in terms that he feels are his own rather than those that come from his parents’ Bengali immigrant culture. In an amazing act of self-definition, which loses nothing by the fact that it is in fact a common event, he abandons the name Gogol and tries to become Nikhil, the conventional Hindu name that was given to him late. But the effort fails—“he doesn’t feel like Nikhil” (Lahiri 105)—and he remains, or returns to, Gogol. Even as Gogol works through his confusion about his public and private identities, Lahiri’s narrator, of course, never wavers; she always refers to him as “Gogol.”

Lahiri’s own experience as a writer echoes Gogol’s. In her 2003 Charlie Rose interview, Lahiri revealed, that “Jhumpa” is her pet name (*daknam*) rather than her good name (*bhalonam*). Growing up in America, however, she has chosen it as her official, public name. The gesture apparently annoys some members of Lahiri’s family, who apparently find the public use of a private, family name to be inappropriate. But it is a gesture that allows Lahiri to continue to claim the version of herself that she knows best and that she wants others to know. Asserting the name “Jhumpa” is at once a misnaming and a

refusal to be misnamed—it is a powerful hybridizing speech act addressed to both her familial-ethnic community and to her American (actually global) readership.

A word about the other Gogol might be in order. For the eponym of Lahiri’s protagonist is one of the many beloved madmen of Russian literature, Nikolai Gogol. Lahiri uses the nominal link between her protagonist and the writer Gogol seriously. There are a number of interesting and provocative parallels to Gogol’s “The Overcoat” in *The Namesake*, especially regarding the odd status of names and naming in Gogol’s story. Gogol’s protagonist has a surreal name himself—Akaky Akakievich (the latter means “son of Akaky”), which suggests a kind of parthenogenetic birth, without history or family. The word *kak* in Russian also apparently means “same,” suggesting redundancy and repetition—at the expense of identity. Furthering the sense of anonymity, Gogol refuses to name the office where Akaky works: “In the department of . . . but it is better not to name the department” (79). Since “The Overcoat” is deeply invested in anonymity, which is at once spiritual and literal, the name “Gogol” is a perfect metonym for the strangeness of the Indian immigrant experience in the United States. As Lahiri shows, the child of immigrants begins in a kind of nowhere place. She is firmly of America, but is not quite an American, in part because she is not recognized as such by others. The child may have privileges—access to education, significant mobility—but she still has to first discover and then adapt to American values and life concepts, which are firmly resisted at home. She can buy herself the appropriate overcoat, but it will not be cheap, and it can always be stolen. Overcoats can be purchased and names can be changed, but it is difficult to change the fact that the city in which one lives remains cold.

The critic Gayatri Spivak has revived the Greek term *catechresis*, in some recent essays, and in her recent book, *The Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999). *Catachresis* is a deceptively simple and straightforward concept: *catachresis* is what occurs when an object is misnamed because there is no proper name for it. “American Indian” is an example of *catechresis*. Since there was no single ethnic term to describe collectively all the different civilizations in the western hemisphere before European discovery and conquest, “American Indian” emerged as the dominant denotative term—a term applied to indigenous civilizations from without. Spivak’s own example relates to the tribal communities (or *Adivasis*) that are scattered around central Indian states such as Bihar (Spivak 142). Spivak in fact spells out in a footnote her understanding of the applicability of *catechresis* to these communities:

The catachresis involved in ‘original Indian nation’ is not just that there is no one ‘tribe’ including all aboriginals resident in what is now ‘India.’ It is also that the concept ‘India’ is itself not ‘Indian,’ and further, not identical with the concept *Bhārata*, just as ‘nation’ and *jāti* have different histories. Furthermore, the sentiment of an entire nation as place of origin is not a statement within aboriginal discursive formations, where locality is of much greater importance. (141)

Spivak raises the issue of *catachresis* in her reading of the impossibility of adequately representing the tribal/*adivasi* community in Mahashweta Devi’s short story “Pterodactyl,” but it might apply equally well in other contexts. Lahiri’s *The Namesake* is also in some sense a novel of *catachresis*, at once an American immigrant story and an intriguing contribution to a growing postcolonial canon. As my example of “American Indian” shows, misnaming is global, and it does not start with American school teachers who find it difficult to pronounce difficult Indian names—such as the “Siddarata,” who inevitably is renamed “Sid,” or “Jaswinder,” who becomes “Jesse.”

Implicit in the types of *catachresis* I am referring to is of course the presumption of unequal relations of power between the named and the naming. Namelessness is a problem for marginal groups, and it seems far more common for these groups to be misnamed from without than it is for the groups to affirmatively name themselves. In the South Asian context in particular, *catachresis* is a process that is inextricable from the onset of modernity at the moment of the colonial encounter. And this plays into Lahiri’s novel as well: Gogol’s seemingly uncontroversial last name is itself a product of Anglicization—as Gangopadhyay became Ganguli to make it go down easier in British English. As Spivak hints above, the misnaming goes further: “India”—like Calcutta and Delhi—is itself an Anglicization of “al-Hind,” the Persian name for the area around the Indus River. Lahiri, in her novel, plays with the fact that the Ganguli family lives on Amherst Street in Calcutta, while the American Ganguli’s live in a college town in Massachusetts. This misnaming raises questions with which scholars continue to struggle: what was India before it was misnamed? What is “India”—or “South Asia”—outside of, or separate from, its name?

“South Asian” Area Studies and Postcolonial Theory

Even as it has been worked out in one way in its everyday usage among members of the South Asian diaspora, the concept of “South Asianness” has evolved in academia, in parallel with, and sometimes at a distance from, the South Asian diaspora community. I am thinking particularly of the field of South Asian studies, which emerged in American universities in particular after 1947. As Nicholas Dirks has

recently pointed out, South Asian studies was in large part a creation of the US State Department, conceived to support US interests in the Cold War (2). In that sense, it was of course not alone—area-studies disciplines were on the whole oriented to this end, as H.D. Harootunian and Masao Miyoshi have argued:

Any consideration of Asian studies must begin with its enabling structure of knowledge. Historically, area studies programs . . . originated in the immediate post-World War II era and sought to meet the necessity of gathering information about the enemy. Later, the investigation was extended to any region of the world considered vital to the interests of the United States in the Cold War. (2)

In its early formation, South Asian studies was structured by an empirical, “us versus them” approach to knowledge, which tended to reinforce preexisting assumptions rather than produce self-consciously limited forms of knowledge about the Indian subcontinent. As Dirks points out, early scholars like Norman Brown generally focused their research interests on either premodern India (ancient Hindu civilization) or rural areas of the Indian subcontinent at the expense of the aspects of the South Asian experience that could be described as modern or urban. Early Indological and anthropological scholarship produced “timeless truths” about India that were presumed to remain applicable even in contemporary South Asia (Dirks 15). This presumed alterity of the subjects under study came under scrutiny starting in the 1970s and continuing through the 1980s as postfoundational disciplinary methods, including poststructuralism, and the epistemological critique of Orientalism initiated by Edward Said, came into vogue. Another reason for a shift in the field is purely demographic: the number of scholars derived from the Indian subcontinent itself increased, inevitably putting pressure on methodologies employed by earlier scholars such as Louis Dumont—methodologies that produced what are now widely seen as tendentious, essentialized interpretations of South Asian cultural and religious practices.

While South Asian studies may in some sense have been a compromised intellectual enterprise owing to its dependence on funding from the State Department, it is nevertheless the case that generous funding enabled the production of an impressive number of scholars with knowledge of multiple South Asian languages and a commitment to immersion in particular South Asian cultural contexts. The end of the Cold War changed the dynamic considerably. South Asia was no longer seen as an urgent point of contestation in a global ideological framework, and the loss of ideological urgency led to lowered levels of research funding in some areas. Harootunian and Miyoshi note with alarm that the declines in State Department funding

following the end of the Cold War corresponded to the growing availability of funding for American Asian studies programs by the governments whose societies are under study—a condition they find equally dangerous if the goal is to produce objective knowledge about a given society or region (4). Area studies programs at American universities are, Harootunian and Miyoshi argue, being replaced by “hyphenated ethnic studies programs that promise students identity in difference” (4), which in the South Asian studies context generally refers to students of South Asian descent pursuing South Asian languages out of curiosity and ethnic pride, rather than professional commitment. The circumstances have become dire enough that the editors of *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies* have strongly argued that the fundamental approach to the disciplinary configuration of area studies be radically rethought:

All of [the essays in the volume *Learning Places*] have been written under the critical sign that acknowledges that the world we now live in has already exceeded the original horizon of area studies programs and that we must begin the labor of reconstituting strategies to securing knowledges of regions of the world that are no longer the outside of Euro-America. Such a task can no longer claim unity, as did the older practices of area studies programs, or even an approach that reduces a region to a cultural whole in time and space. . . . What we mean by referring to the afterlife of area studies is a perspective that has surpassed the older global divisions inaugurated after World War II that informed the organization of knowledge and teaching of regions of the world outside Euro-America but considered essential in the Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union. Just as the older empires moved toward decolonization and a new global order installed after World War II, so we must consider a world no longer dominated by the requirements of the Cold War. (14)

The dynamic shifted yet again following September 11, 2001, as the US declared a new “War on Terror,” which once again privileged a certain kind of knowledge pertaining to South Asia. A new demand for experts in languages such as Pashto and Urdu suddenly emerged, and some of this resurgent interest translated to fields other than those specifically oriented to the analysis of Islamic fundamentalism. There was, for instance, a considerable spike in interest in novels and memoirs relating to Afghanistan and Iran, centered around the bestselling novel *The Kite Runner*.⁵

The old area-studies approach to South Asian Studies and the new “War on Terror”-inspired interest in religious fundamentalism in the Indian subcontinent have one thing in common: they are both *instrumentalist* approaches to knowledge about South Asia. Oriented to answering particular questions in the service of broader ideological pursuits, they overlook topics not oriented to those questions. Dirks, for

instance, points out that early South Asian studies scholarship focused disproportionately on rural South Asia, and ancient (therefore, unchanging) culture, religion, and literature—to the exclusion of urban phenomena and the contemporary issues. Though it may not be consciously intended, such skewed emphases reinforce the idea of an underdeveloped society—obliquely justify both colonial domination and various forms of postcolonial tactical interventionism. That said, this focus was eventually corrected; for Dirks, the process began with the scholarship of Bernard Cohn (Dirks 19), and the sheer exhaustiveness of South Asian studies scholarship perhaps mitigated doubts about the ideological independence of scholars from their funding sources. Far worse is the current conjuncture, where the “War on Terror” tends to lead to an almost exclusive interest in “religious fundamentalism” that might lead adherents to commit acts of terrorism. The narrowness of the field of inquiry leads scholars to overlook large regions of South Asia where acts of terrorism inspired by religion do not figure very large, including some regions where other kinds of violence is prevalence—one thinks of Naxalites in southern and eastern India and Nepal. Also overlooked are large swaths of what might be termed “everyday life” that might have nothing at all to do with terrorism.

Needless to say, in much of this history, the study of literature is not very much a factor. Dirks suggests that while literature was an important part of earlier South Asian studies scholarship, it was largely ancient religious and philosophical literature, and thus it was most often studied by scholars in those disciplines (30). Another reason for the lack of interest in literature might relate to the time it took for awareness to emerge about a large and diverse body of work: contemporary South Asian literature largely came into the public limelight in the 1970s and ‘80s, following the publication of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. It should be noted, however, that this is in some sense a claim about readership, publication, and reception of works in English and not about South Asian literature itself. World-class modernist and postmodernist writing in South Asian languages was produced and ignored for years both before and after South Asian literature in English began to be published in the West. As a result of these and other various factors, South Asian studies has historically been largely a collection of social science disciplines.

Even as area studies has historically emphasized the social sciences at the expense of literature, ironically it was in English departments in particular that the critique of area studies articulated by Edward Said in *Orientalism* was most strongly felt. As H.D. Harootunian has argued in his essay, “Postcoloniality’s Unconscious/Area Studies’ Desire,” Said’s critique of the Eurocentric

accumulation and deployment of knowledge about the East—the discourse of Orientalism—was effectively rejected by area studies, but embraced by English studies:

Said's book represented an important intellectual challenge to the mission of area studies which, if accepted, would have reshaped area studies and freed it from its own reliance on the Cold War and the necessities of the national security state. What Said's book disclosed to area studies for a short moment was its desire for theory, which it had displaced by privileging language acquisition as both all the theory and method needed for understanding a region. Hence, the challenge was never accepted, perhaps for the very reasons of instrumentality that had implanted such programs in colleges and universities in the first place, cumulatively constituting stakes and investments that made change too high a price to pay. Instead, Said's critique migrated to English studies to transform the study of literature into a full-scale preoccupation with identity and its construction. (152-53)

In effect, Harootunian suggests that area studies was structurally unable to accept the Saidian critique, in which unequal relations of power must in some sense compromise the objectivity of knowledge about the colonial and postcolonial world. However, for its part, literary studies has, under the rubric of postcolonial theory, deployed the critique largely in pursuit of "identity and its construction." On this latter note, Harootunian perhaps overshoots somewhat, as postcolonial theory has demonstrably engaged topics that go considerably beyond the narrow-minded type of culturalism he ascribes to it. Indeed, many prominent postcolonial theorists have been aggressive in deconstructing the politics of identity in their works. One thinks, again, of Spivak).

It also appears that area studies has, over time, come to embrace the critique of Orientalism and the postcolonial paradigm, with the consequence that postcolonial theory is now being attacked by conservatives in US congressional hearings. As Carlo Bonura and Laurie Sears have pointed out:

Following the introduction of the International Studies in Higher Education Act in 2003, a growing public conversation emerged over what is seen as pervasive 'anti-Americanism' and the open questioning of foreign policy from within area studies. Stanley Kurtz, perhaps the most widely recognized academic advancing such critiques (and whose testimony to Congress flooded the e-mail of those involved in area studies in 2003-2004), suggested that the reforms outlined in the act, including the formation of an oversight commission, would allow for 'a restoration of intellectual and political balance to our area studies programs.' The imbalance that Kurtz perceived as threatening national security arose from 'the ruling intellectual paradigm in academic area studies (especially

Middle Eastern Studies) called 'post-colonial theory.' . . . Kurtz's chief anxiety rests with the left-leaning politicization of area studies scholars: 'the core premise of post-colonial theory is that it is immoral for a scholar to put his knowledge of foreign languages and cultures in the service of American power.' (6-7)

It would be quite striking if Harootunian's argument that area studies' embrace of postcolonial theory might lead to a loss of identity as a field were to be rendered literally true, with laws enacted against it by a hostile Congress.

As a final point, it might be worth noting that even among secular-minded, progressive South Asian citizens, the move to postnationalist thinking suggested by the idea of South Asian identity has been met with a mixed response. The magazine *Himal Southasian* has attempted to work toward realizing the idea of a shared, progressive South Asian cultural and intellectual realm, but even the idealism of this magazine of politics, arts, and ideas was challenged in the discussions that took place at the time of its formation. The eminent historian Ramachandra Guha, for instance, pointed out that there are real differences in the constitution of civil society in the different South Asian nations, so the India-centrism that is seen by progressives as a problem is in fact understandable, though not without problems of its own:

In at least two vital respects India is to South Asia as the United States is to the Americas. Within its borders, it is more reliably democratic than its neighbours. Outside, it acts with an impatient arrogance that is born out of its belief that it is of right the region's superpower. Many thinkers of what I call the Himal School of Thought tend to underestimate the strengths of Indian democracy. The argument often aired by this school is to the effect that, "The governments of India and Pakistan are bad, but the people are good." But the fact is that Indian politics is nourished by much stronger traditions of democracy and federalism than any of its neighbours. Most of the states of India have autonomous and vigorous traditions of cultural and intellectual life. In political and ideological terms, the Hindi 'heartland' is much weaker than, say, the Punjab in Pakistan. Perhaps the relative strengths of Indian democracy are an accident of history. Nehru, the committed democrat, was at the helm for seventeen years, whereas comparable figures such as Jinnah, Koirala and Mujib died too soon. However, there is no question that, relative to its neighbours, there is a robustness to India's democratic traditions that even the chauvinist Sangh Parivar cannot undermine. At the same time, India has become increasingly insensitive to the needs and interests of its neighbours.

For Guha, the primary limitation of a South Asian regional identity is the inevitable centrality of India. But for Guha that presumption of centrality seems less like a liability and more like a strength, as he sees

real differences in the constitution of both the political systems and the respective civil societies of different South Asian states. As Guha sees it, India's dominance may be the product of accidental events, such as the early death of Jinnah in Pakistan, but that does not make it any less real.

Other participants in the *Himal* roundtable that took place in November 2001 were much more sharply critical of what Siddharth Varadarajan referred to in his statement at the conference as "South Asianism." Ashis Nandy, for instance, described the idea as essentially "artificial." In his statement, Nandy mentions Kipling and the possibility that a Pakistani reader today is "likely to be confused when in the context of Lahore, Kipling discusses Indianness and Indianisms." A portion of Nandy's statement follows:

These cannot be easily reinterpreted as either Pakistani or West Punjabi identity, and talking of British-Indianness in this context sounds culturally meaningless. The personality traits and cultural features Kipling describes cannot have vanished with the disappearance of the British Empire, and something called India had entered the South Asian imagination by the time British India splintered into a number of nation-states. So, South Asia is yet to enter our consciousness, and it may or may not do so in the future. Its real status is akin to that of Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in India. You can meaningfully talk of Biharis, Tamilians and Bengalis, but you cannot in the same sense talk of Uttarpradeshis, Andhrapradeshis, or Madhyapradeshis. These terms have a touch of the comic about them. If you are an Uttarpradeshi, you usually identify yourself either with a city (you are a Lucknauvi or a Banarsi) or with a region (Awadhi or Purabhiya).

For Nandy, the greatest ill is not the desire to create—or re-create—a pan-South Asian identity, but the attempts by South Asian nation-states to "engineer" their citizens to correspond neatly to the monocultural national-cultural identities presumed by classical nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe. In fact, such direct correspondence, as Nandy points out, is always going to meet with resistance from ordinary people. One could object, of course, that Nandy, through his critique of modern nation-states, is arguing for a kind of South Asian identity after all, though he might prefer to think of it as resurrection of an authentic, precolonial Hindustan rather than South Asia. Nandy's image of a set of inclusive and overlapping local and regional identities, a "confederation of lifestyles and life-support systems," as he puts it, has more than a little in common with what the advocates of the "Himal school of thought" are proposing.

Afterword: Do We Need a South Asian Literary Studies?

Lost somewhere between South Asian studies and postcolonial theory, South Asian *literary* studies has sometimes seemed to languish, but given the myriad critiques of area studies cited above, the lack of attention may not be an urgent problem. It has often been noted that among the first generation of postcolonial theorists were many scholars of Indian origin. While these scholars have at times published essays relating to South Asian literature—one thinks of Spivak’s essays in the often-overlooked *Outside in the Teaching Machine*—their best known works have either focused on cultural and political issues (i.e., cultural studies), or European philosophical texts that do not have a direct connection to the Indian subcontinent (i.e., Derrida, Foucault, and Marx). Even as South Asian scholars have become highly influential in literary studies in North America, they have not necessarily focused a great deal on supporting the study of South Asian literature *per se*. On the other hand, it might be said that the conceptual tools these scholars developed—such as the Spivakian idea of *catachresis* I referred to above—may be readily applicable to scholars interested in South Asian literature in particular.

At a disciplinary and professional level, as specialization in postcolonial literature and theory became increasingly widely accepted in large and mid-size English departments around the country, the study of South Asian literature has generally been folded into the broader postcolonial category, and considered a major (sometimes the major) implied sub-field. The dominance of postcolonial and erasure of South Asian is strongly supported by institutional signals: in a given year, the Modern Language Association job list shows several dozen positions in postcolonial literature, but one generally does not see any positions listed for specialists in South Asian literature. Thirty-six journals with the keyword “postcolonial” are listed in the *MLA Bibliography*, but only three with the keyword “South Asia” are listed. Again, that is not to say that South Asian literature is not being widely written about. Indeed, South Asian authors have gained in prominence and have found acceptance in the emerging postcolonial canon. But while a certain limited slice of the literature of the Indian subcontinent has moved from a relatively provincial, minor field of study to the center stage of literary studies, the field of South Asian literature has not followed suit.

Of course, one might well wonder whether that is a problem, since, as I say, many South Asian authors have in fact been widely assimilated into postcolonialist research agendas and entered into syllabi in North American classrooms. More conceptually, since postcolonialism is so strongly defined by its critique of Eurocentric frameworks for producing knowledge, it seems counterproductive to insist on recreating a category based on geographical coincidence and a

dubious sense of cultural similarity rather than on formal or thematic unities. However, the lack of broad interest in creating a specialized field devoted to South Asian literary studies in particular does lead to some problems. Most obviously, it privileges authors whose themes and style conform to postcolonial norms—and whose works are therefore likely to be understood transnationally—over authors whose concerns might be seen as more exclusively local. Along these lines, it is no accident that a diasporic writer like Amitav Ghosh will be quite popular in postcolonial literature classrooms, while a more localized writer like U. R. Anantha Murthy, who wrote in Kannada for a Kannada-speaking audience, is essentially unknown outside of India. And here language is a key factor: the prevalence of postcolonial theory, despite its emphasis on countering Eurocentrism, has to some extent made the in-depth study of South Asian languages seem superfluous. A second problem might be the danger that scholars frequently make judgments about works of literature based on a relatively thin understanding of the rich history of modern South Asian literary culture, extending as it does back to the nineteenth century. Specialization may lead to parochialism, but at least it has the potential to lead scholars to deep immersion in a particular cultural context. Ideally, postcolonial literary studies, which is likely to continue to remain dominant in the North American academy, will be re-centered somewhat, to encourage more scholars to gain deep, specialized knowledge, including knowledge of language, of the particular and the local as an essential part of broader critiques.

Notes

¹ For more on naming from a sociological perspective, see Prema Kurien, “To Be or Not To Be South Asian: Contemporary Indian American Politics.”

² Here is how Lahiri defines the two in her novel:

Besides, there are always pet names to tide one over: a practice of Bengali nomenclature grants, to every single person, two names. In Bengali the word for pet name is *daknam*, meaning, literally, the name by which one is called, by friends, family, and other intimates, at home and in other private, unguarded moments. Pet names are a persistent remnant of childhood, a reminder that life is not always so serious, so formal, so complicated. . . . Every pet name is paired with a good name, a *bhalonam*, for identification in the outside world. Consequently, good names appear on envelopes, on diplomas, in telephone directories, and in all other public places. . . . Good names tend to represent dignified and enlightened qualities. . . . Pet names have no such aspirations. Pet names are never recorded officially, only uttered and remembered. (25-26)

³ One participant in an Internet forum debate, Vivek, describes the South Indian point of view quite well on the Sepia Mutiny blog (sepiamutiny.com):

I identify first as Indian, South Indian, Asian, and Tamil all before 'American' even pops into my mind. I've been criticized for it by many people—my own parents included—and I haven't yet figured out why 'Indian' is what I identify with most. I did not start using the term 'desi' until the last couple years or so, and to be honest, it doesn't feel natural or comfortable coming out of my mouth. My parents have never once used the term and if memory serves me correct, during my childhood, I only heard North Indian people refer to themselves as desi. My South Indian friends and I only use the term in mixed company, so to speak. I've noticed how often people on [SepiaMutiny.com] refer to India as Desh or Bharat—both very distant terms to me. If my family refers to India, they just use 'ooru' or amooru.'

⁴ For more on this, see *African-American English: Structure, History, and Use*, edited by Salikoko S. Mufwene, John R. Rickford, Guy Bailey, and John Baugh. For the evolutionary history of naming in the African American community in particular, see chapter 7, Geneva Smitherman's "Word From the Hood: the Lexicon of African-American Vernacular English."

⁵ See Amardeep Singh, "Republics of the Imagination: Afghan and Iranian Expatriate Narratives."

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