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Rethinking ‘the Global’: View from an Indian Social Science University

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Abstract

Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD) is a public social science and humanities university instituted in 2009 to bring together academic excellence and social justice. It was natural for the university to begin with focusing on concerns generative of Indian and South Asian realities. Soon, however, it was realised that regions and localities are co-produced by intersecting processes at multiple scales. Since 2012, a few of us have collaborated to think through ‘the Global’ at the present conjuncture, that is, in a post-Cold War, neoliberal, multipolar, urban and ecologically-fraught world. These conversations resulted in the formation of the new School of Global Affairs, with academic programmes planned in the areas of Global Studies, Urban Studies, Public Health, Religion, and Science and Technology Studies. Of these, the first two have already begun. In designing the programmes, among other things, a pedagogical reimagination of the world has been attempted. Rather than take the continental imaginary for granted, we have pieced the world together via alternate cultural/environmental regions such as the Indian Ocean and the Himalayas. This way of imagining the world brings a historical, ecological and critical lens to the continuities and ruptures in the study of Africa and Asia-Africa, which, in the dominant thought regimes, are viewed through a narrowly state-centered and strategic lens. In my brief essay, I delve further into these issues, and make an argument for an engagement with Africa as part of a wider reimagination of the global in higher education and scholarship.

Keywords: Global Studies, Institution building, Pedagogy, Africa-Asia, India

Introduction

This brief intervention takes the case of the conceptualisation and creation of new degree programs in Global Studies at Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD) to think through the ways in which fresh approaches to the study of world regions may be evolved, and in particular what it takes to create institutional mechanisms to study Africa from India, while being attuned to larger dynamics within which these relationships unfold. The field of Global Studies goes back to the mid-1990s when first of the programs appeared in North America, and has expanded in recent decades to not only Europe but also Australia and East Asia, with at least a hundred academic programmes at the last count. According to sociologist Mark Jurgensmeyer (2013), who has been associated with the field since its early years, Global Studies (GS) practitioners concur on five basic aspects that serve to unite their otherwise diverse interests and pedagogies. First, they focus on “the analysis of events,

activities, ideas, trends, processes, and phenomena that appear across national boundaries and cultural regions” (766), so the scope of GS is transnational. Second, since they are interested in complex issues approached from different vantage points, the field is essentially interdisciplinary and even transdisciplinary. Third, while for many scholars the entry point may be economic globalisation since the 1970s, GS as a field explores phenomena historically, situating the present within a wider horizon and context. Fourth, it is ‘critical and multicultural’ (768), that is, it aims to go beyond a Eurocentric frame, inviting new ways of imagining and seeing the world. Fifth, and finally, there is the normative element to GS in that it aims to produce ‘global citizen’, individuals who view themselves as connected to the world and approach concerns in a more open manner as a strong critique of xenophobic ways of being. The field thus emerged as a powerful alternative to the dominant ways in which the world was understood as a collection of so many world regions—and studied within largely distinct ‘Area Studies’ departments—rather than a networked whole. Furthermore, by the turn of the century, the Cold War origins of Area Studies itself was in question (Cumings, 1997) and GS thus emerged as an attractive option to individuals and institutions thinking through futurity and the university together.

AUD was set up in 2008 by the government of Delhi to promote teaching-learning in the humanities and social sciences. It draws its name from Dr B.R. Ambedkar, a towering figure of twentieth century Indian polity, and champion for equality and social justice. Dr Ambedkar rose from his birth in an untouchable (Dalit) community to earn graduate degrees from Columbia University and the London School of Economics. He was the first Law Minister of independent India and the Chair of the Constitution Drafting Committee. The Indian Constitution, prepared by this committee, was adopted in late-1949. Dr Ambedkar is widely acknowledged as an original thinker and remains an inspiration for Dalit politics and more widely for social movements in India and beyond. It was thus important for AUD to stay true to its name and focus on the simultaneous need for justice and rigour within a public education framework, at a time when the pressures on states to privatise higher education are tremendous. The university invested in programs that are committed to reimagining higher education through such a perspective, while also not repeating the well-trodden disciplinary path given that Delhi alone has three existing large public universities (Delhi University, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and Jamia Millia Islamia). The first set of programmes at AUD, that is, Development Studies, Environment and Development, and Psychosocial Studies, paved the way for the institution’s future, by focusing on: 1) socially relevant themes/problem areas, 2) interdisciplinarity and, 3) by opening the space for new thinking in design of curricula and

pedagogies, originality. Programs in Culture and Creative Expressions, Education, Social Design, Gender Studies, and Translation are similarly motivated and designed. AUD also began programs in disciplines like Economics, Sociology, and History which imbibe some of the principles outlined above but stay faithful to specific disciplinary traditions. Since curriculum was organically linked to progressive social change, there was also an emphasis on societal relevance, which connected the programs to the immediate context—Delhi, India, and South Asia more broadly. By the time the university turned five, the need to expand perspective and curricula beyond the immediate region started to be felt. It was here that conversations about what this expanded perspective might entail began. These discussions had a few different aspects. First, we wanted to retain the AUD's signature emphasis on problem/theme rather than disciplines. Second, we were particularly interested in building knowledges of world regions, such as Southeast Asia, the TransHimalayas and Africa with which our own region has been historically entangled but due to Eurocentric perspectives and disciplinary practices, these connections have been largely effaced. Added to these, were certain pedagogical goals, including a strong emphasis on independent thought, on research and links with the world beyond the university. Through intensive discussions, we gave shape to the programs in Global Studies both at undergraduate (BA) and graduate (MA) levels, looking to translate these principles into concrete curriculum and pedagogical practices. These programs are described in more detail below, with particular stress to our thinking around the question of world regions, including Africa.

Understanding the Global

As mentioned above, we designed different levels of programmes in Global Studies. Here I will spend more time on the graduate programme, since there is greater flexibility to innovate and experiment at that level within the Indian higher education system, though of course, our BA in GS is also unique and innovative. In the MA, we structure the programme around three axes: *Global Themes*, *Critical Knowledges*, and what we call *Centres of Globality*.

After much brainstorming as well as scanning other similar programmes around the world, we decided to build content around four transdisciplinary themes:

1. **Wealth and Poverty:** this involves asking why is the world is composed of tremendous inequality at various scales, urban, national and global. Approaching this question requires a historical view, bringing in questions of colonialism and postcolonialism, and the intersections of political economy with class, caste, race and gender.

2. **Cultures and Identities:** the thematic is interested in the aspect of mobility and its links with cultural forms and subjectivities, across the realms of people, materials/commodities, and ideas.
3. **State and Democracy:** considers the dialectic of power and resistance across space and time. It is especially interested in problematising the taken-for-granted institutional architecture of the nation-state, and throwing open the concepts of state, territoriality, and political movements.
4. **Global Environmental Change:** takes seriously the ecological question, and its linkages with political economy, geopolitics and environmentalism, both individual and collective.

Each of the courses under these themes has been designed by interdisciplinary teams of scholars drawn from across the social sciences and humanities. One guiding principle that we abided by was that scholars part of the process do not feel compelled to consider their own specific discipline as central to any of the themes, and therefore, do not insist on a particular canon as an indispensable part of the curricula. Rather, a collaborative slate was imagined on which the teams charted out the most critical questions, concepts and thinkers to the particular theme, and curricula were created through these discussions. One motivation for this was that a theme like ‘Wealth and Poverty’, for instance, should not be immediately subsumed within Economics, which brings its own narrow conception of the issue and a path-dependent set of methods. Rather, inequality was the entry point, which has been of interest not only to economists but also sociologists, anthropologists, historians and geographers. Students of the program thus gain familiarity to the multiple perspectives with bearing on a thematic area, and are invited to navigate their own way through these issues, rather than being handed a disciplinary guidebook to follow. In this goal, the axis of ‘critical knowledges’, which begins the conversation through the first semester graduate course ‘Knowledges in a Global Perspective’, is also of importance since it builds students’ understanding of the genealogies of academic disciplines and seemingly-universal social science concepts. In particular, the historical processes that produce the contemporary disciplinary formations, as well as alternative imaginaries are discussed, including those inspired by the calls towards decolonising knowledges and theory from the South.

Centres of Globality

In part, these emphasis also inform the geographical imaginary embedded in the programs. Instead of taking the colonial continental division of the earth, reflected in Eurocentric area studies programs, that draw on a territorial, nation-state, human-centred ontology, our attempt has been to bring in the maritime, connected, and ecological aspects to a global imagination. To this end, we

build our curriculum around what we call ‘Centres of Globality’, that is, the regions through which, with students, we piece together an alternative map of the world than the one we have inherited, and that we have looked to destabilise. We have begun with two such regions, orienting a series of courses and language training around them, while continuing to develop curricula on other regions similarly. The first of these is the *Himalayan and TransHimalayan Region*, which encompasses diverse geologies, ecologies, livelihood forms, settlement patterns, cultures and governance systems. The region includes parts of Central Asia, South Asia, Tibet, China and Southeast Asia, with a history of interactions that dates back to the ancient Silk Route, waves of conquests, imperial and colonial experiences, postcolonial developmentalisms and more recent geopolitical scrambles. It is also a unique biogeographical region, critical to the hydrological and biodiversity balance of adjacent and connected regions, that is under stress due to global climate change. With courses like ‘Kashmir and the Himalayan Region’, ‘Global Northeast (India)’, and the study of Chinese language—we have plans to introduce Persian in the near future—we encourage students to gain deeper understanding of the region and its global connections, through independent research projects including the final semester dissertation.

The second centre of globality that we have begun with is the *Indian Ocean Region*. The region has been of interest to humanities and social sciences scholarship in the last few years for various reasons. In parallel with the Himalayas, while mountains or oceans are typically considered barriers to movement and interactions, in reality they have been effective conduits that have facilitated deep relationships across disparate regions, producing composite cultures, which, however, have not been of interest to scholars until recently (Hofmeyr, 2007). The Indian Ocean, to such a reading, is the glue that binds South Asia, the Gulf, East Africa, and islands such as Mauritius and Reunion in a common history. These connections are particularly powerful in the littoral zones of these regions, and can be seen in people’s material lives, languages and cultures. Courses like ‘Transformations in Society and Space’ (more below), ‘After Forced Migrations’ and ‘Global South Asians’ shed light on these aspects, and we currently offer French language to students so that they can connect with parts of Africa and the Indian Ocean islands. In the future, Arabic and Swahili will allow us to deepen this region’s understanding.

Approaching Africa and African Knowledges

My own academic trajectory involves the study of urban and environmental change through a critical geographical perspective. My doctoral work, based at Ohio State University, was on these dynamics in the context of copper mining in Northwestern Zambia, and I conducted archival and ethnographic work in the region as part of this research. In the course of the PhD, I developed expertise in African Studies, particularly the Southern African region, and was exposed to the incredibly rich work not only in the Anglo-American academy but also in the Francophone world via translations. Even as I moved back to India and started research in the immediate region, I continue to draw on scholarship of and from Africa. The writings, for instance, of Achille Mbembe on postcolonial political forms, and of Archie Mafeje and Kate Crehan on identity and livelihoods in rural and urbanising contexts have been pivotal to my intellectual growth. It is for this reason that I have been personally motivated to create avenues for intellectual sharing between the two regions. At the same time, it has been important to remember to not simply replicate the area studies imaginaries in creating new institutions. It is rather through the Indian Ocean that we aim to build meaningful academic relations—in theory and in practice—with Africa and African institutions of higher learning. This is so that the deep relationships alongside which India or South Asia and many parts of Africa have shared bonds are alive and besides us rather than invisibilised when only two parts of the world are chosen for comparative work.

Meaningful understanding of African knowledges are built in our curriculum from the vantage point of different fields of study. For instance, courses on Political Ecology draw on the excellent scholarship from on African experiences of environmental change and landscape transformations as well as attendant governmentalities, and place these in conversation with the South Asian literatures on similar concerns, especially as different global region confront the shared challenges of climate change, disease and public health and urbanisation. As mentioned above, the course Transformations in Society and Space builds students' foundation in global history and geography by focussing on the particular spatialities of selected world historical moments. These include, ports, trade and the Indian Ocean world; the idea of 'terra nullius' on which colonial material and epistemological practices were grounded; the plantation system and the enslavement of Africans and displacement of indigenous peoples of the New World; the mining town as the expression of a specific political economic process that connected African localities and populations to the world market; and the transformation of the American Midwest from manufacturing hub to the Rustbelt consequent to the neoliberal shifts in the organisation of production from Fordism to Post-Fordism. Once again, appreciation of African realities and histories is aimed to tie organically to larger

processes, and we are especially mindful of focusing on the agency of people to creatively respond, resist and actively shape their historical geographies.

These are notes based on the process of conceptualising a new academic direction and are the result of years of collective deliberation. As the programs run for a few years and new colleagues join us and participate in the process, the relevance of the vision and effectiveness of its translation into specific curricular and pedagogical interventions will no doubt be reviewed. In this process, conversations with scholars beyond our borders are critical and I hope to get fresh inspiration from our panel and others at African Knows! in December.

References

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Bio

Dr Rohit Negi is Associate Professor and Deputy Dean in the School of Global Affairs at Ambedkar University Delhi. He has MA from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and PhD in Geography from the Ohio State University. His research is at the intersection of urban and environmental change with regional specialisation in Southern Africa and India. Rohit's work has been published in, among others, the *Journal of Southern African Studies*, *Review of African Political Economy* and *Geoforum*.