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Introduction: reconsidering the region in India: mobilities, actors and development politics

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Abstract

In this introduction to a special issue on ‘Reconsidering the Region in India’, we aim to develop a synthetic and theoretically nuanced account of the multifarious ways in which the idea of region has been imbricated in diverse spatial, political, cultural and socio-economic configurations. We draw from various bodies of anthropological, geographic and historical literature to elaborate on three themes that we believe are central to understanding contemporary processes of region-making in India: trans-regional mobilities and connections; the actors who produce and perform regional imaginaries; and changing regional politics of development.

This special issue of the *Journal of South Asian Development* brings together four articles that explore the imagination and materiality of the ‘region’, a category that has recently reappeared, especially in relation to the politics of development in India. The idea for this issue grew out of the Provincial Globalisation research programme, which studied the effects of transnational flows at the regional level and in provincial towns of India.¹ The programme had continuities with Koskimaki’s research on the relationship between regional assertion and development politics in small hill towns of Uttarakhand, and Upadhya’s earlier work on development, caste and regional capital in Coastal Andhra. This collaboration stimulated productive conversations about the region and its variegated political and social lives in contemporary India— in particular, the reconfiguration of regional meanings and affiliations, which have been intensifying despite increasing mobility and transnational connectivity, and the expansion of urban cosmopolitanisms. While anthropological studies based in particular localities often take the region as given, in this essay we argue for a reconsideration of how regional identities are reproduced or challenged in response to diverse impulses and interventions, from within the region and beyond.

The concept of region has a long and varied lineage in scholarship on South Asia. India in particular has been traditionally viewed as a composite of different regions, characterized by distinct political and cultural histories, economic profiles or social formations. This mapping of India’s regional variation emerged dialectically out of interactions among state-governing practices, cultural and political movements, and territorial assertions and

conflicts. As several scholars have shown, India's regions are products not only of their precolonial pasts, but also especially of colonial techniques of rule based on spatial and social categorizations (Cohn, 1987a; Dirks, 2001; Gidwani, 2008; Sivaramakrishnan, 1999). Vora and Feldhaus trace the rise of regionalist politics to the period of the nationalist movement, when categories of language and ethnicity became prominent forms of identity (2006a, pp. 9–10). Across different parts of India (such as Bengal, Andhra and Tamil Nadu), regional identities were forged particularly through the modernization of vernacular languages and the consolidation of regional literary cultures and folk traditions (Pollock, 1995). Distinct regional identities were elaborated and contested by provincial elites in their efforts to exert power over their territories, especially through language politics (Mitchell, 2009; Naregal, 2001; Ramaswamy, 1997). The idea of India as a composite of different cultural regions also became established within the nascent disciplines of sociology and social anthropology in the late colonial period (e.g., in the work of D. P. Mukherjee; see Routray, 2008, p. 363), from where it circulated through pedagogical and other texts and became part of popular 'common sense'. The reorganization of states along linguistic lines from 1956 institutionalized the assumed congruence between language, territory and culture. Thus, in everyday as well as academic discourses, India's regions tend to be discussed as if they were self-evident and timeless entities—a view that is reflected in the production of official statistics, state-planning practices, and mappings of agro-economic regions (e.g., Thorner, 1996).

However, as the historian Bernard Cohn suggested several decades ago in a 1966 symposium on 'India's Regional Elites', regions may be 'objective' or 'subjective'. Cohn emphasized the role of 'non-physical phenomena' (1987b, p. 102) in the formation of regions, as against the prevailing tendency to define them in terms of '*actual* distributions of some trait or trait complex' (Stein, 1967, p. 41). He also distinguished among different types of regions—historical, linguistic, cultural, social structural (Cohn, 1987b, p. 102) – which are not always congruent. In his discussion of 'linguistic regions', for example, Cohn noted the varying 'literary and vernacular standards' and differences in forms of speech between urban and rural areas, as well as the existence of multiple languages within a single locality (1987b, p. 106). This early debate foreshadowed later discussions about territoriality, politics and colonial influences in the production of regions.

In recent anthropological and historical work on South Asia, the region has been reconceptualized as a complex, protean category, leading scholars to call for a 'rethinking' of the region (Misra & Niranjana, 2005) and to 'bring the region back in' to scholarship on Indian history and development (Nair, 2011a; Sivaramakrishnan & Agrawal, 2003). Emphasis has also shifted to the cultural and spatial politics of regions and the social and economic contexts of regionalist movements (Parthasarathy, 2013, p. 19). Still, most research on the region in India has concentrated on sub-nationalist movements, language politics, or regional literatures and cinema.

This introductory essay, and the articles collected here, expand on this body of work by focusing on several understudied aspects of region-making in India: trans-regional and

transnational connections and mobilities; the constitutive role of provincial economies and small town worlds in the regional imaginary; the development politics, aspirations and conflicts that are reflected in autonomy movements; and the role of multiple publics in building the idea of a regional homeland. Further, we explore the influence of regionally rooted communities, whether ‘dominant castes’ or marginalized groups, in the shaping of regional politics and circulating (and sometimes conflicting) narratives of regional identity.

The articles in this special issue represent four regions of India—coastal Andhra Pradesh, central Gujarat, the Thekkady region of Kerala and the Uttarakhand hills—and all explore the dynamics of region-making based on careful ethnographic research. The authors go beyond standard social science analyses of regionalism in terms of competing economic interests or political alignments, to examine the production of these regions through cultural, social and political practices and actors. Furthermore, the articles illustrate how transnational flows of capital, development agendas, political ideologies or nationalist longings come into play in changing regional imaginaries. Even as leaders and ordinary people must prove their regional affiliations in public events and mobilizations, other actors from beyond the region (such as diasporic groups) often become significant players in these contestations and reconfigurations. Thus, we suggest that regional politics and imaginaries need to be re-theorized in the context of the growing transnational dynamics of provincial India as well as changing development policies and ideologies.

In what follows, we outline three themes that we believe are central to understanding current processes of region-making in India: trans-regional circulations and connections; the actors, communities and publics who produce and perform regional imaginaries; and regional politics of development. Our aim in this essay is to work towards a more synthetic and theoretically nuanced account of the multifarious ways in which the idea of region has been imbricated in various spatial, political, cultural and socio-economic configurations and reconfigurations in contemporary India.

Mobilities and the Making of Regions

In coastal Andhra, a mobile regional elite has been engaged in a process of ‘reterritorialization’ of their home region following the division of the state of Andhra Pradesh. In northern India, the trials of circular migration have shaped a masculine political sphere in which youth raise demands for local employment and development in Uttarakhand. Back in southwest India, the movement of tourists and environmentalists through a national park in Kerala intersects with circulating development agendas to produce an image of regional ‘exceptionalism’. And, in the western part of the country, members of the Muslim Vohra community have reproduced and strengthened their identification with the Charotar region of central Gujarat, even as they are traversing transnational routes of mobility and trade. These examples from the articles collected here (by Upadhyaya, Koskimaki, Chaudhuri and Verstappen, respectively) illustrate how diverse experiences, politics and practices of mobility have shaped regional identities and imaginaries. In this section, we examine the emergence and transformation of regions through

the lens of mobility, exploring how different kinds of circulations and cross-connections with other spaces and places impinge on regional identities and formations.

Much of the theoretical elaboration on the region has taken place within the discipline of geography, building on the key concepts of place, space and scale (Massey, 1994). For geographers, both space and place are 'constituted out of spatialized social relations—and narratives about them' (Allen, Massey, & Cochrane, 1998, pp. 1–2), and space is viewed as 'an open and ongoing production' (Massey, 2005, p. 55).² As Passi and Metzger suggest: 'Regions are ... complicated constellations of materiality, agency, social relations and power ... institutional structures and processes that are continuously "becoming" instead of just "being"' (2017, p. 26). More recently, geographers have theorized the relationship between mobility and region-making by focusing on the role of flows and networks. This so-called relational approach posits regions as unstable and permeable, as constantly 'created and recreated through networked social relationships', especially those that extend beyond the region (Allen & Cochrane, 2007, p. 1162; cf. Paasi, 2001, 2002). Amin, for instance, calls for a deeper understanding of 'outside' influences and exchanges in cultural life and institutional frameworks, arguing that 'regions come with no automatic promise of territorial or systemic integrity, since they are made through the spatiality of flow, juxtaposition, porosity and relational connectivity' (2004, p. 34). Similarly, both the 'spatial turn' within sociology (Soja, 1989) and the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller & Urry, 2006) have advocated the integration of the categories of space and mobility into social analysis

While the relational approach has opened up new conceptualizations of the region, several scholars have critiqued it for potentially neglecting the ways in which regions are 'mobilized as political territories' and '(re-)constituted as cultural spaces of belonging and democracy' (MacLeod & Jones 2007, p. 1178).⁴ Jonas emphasizes the role of territorial politics as well as 'regional strategies of economic development' (2012, p. 249), while Jones (2009) argues for a recognition of both the relational dimensions of space and how it can become 'bounded and constraining' (Enriken, 2011, p. 12). However, Addie and Keil suggest that these debates have been primarily normative and ideological, and argue instead for an examination of 'real existing regionalism' viewed as a 'contested product of discourses (talk), territorial relationships (territory) and technologies (both material and of power)' (2015, p. 409). Moving beyond this 'territorial/relational divide' (Jones & Paasi, 2013, p. 3), this special issue illustrates the multiple ways in which movement, travel, circulation and social connectivity contribute to the making and remaking of regions. The mobilization of regional symbols around particular landscapes, the circulation of people, capital and media objects, and the strengthening of trans-regional social and political ties, are some of the 'relational' modalities through which regions are constituted and reaffirmed. At the same time, we recognize that actors often operate with 'fixed' identities, reproducing local historical narratives and imagining their regions through conceptions of territorial boundedness.

Although these debates around the region have drawn largely on the European experience,⁵ the renewed focus on the region within metropolitan urban and regional studies has

many resonances with similar debates in the global south. However, these connections and comparisons are not often explored (in contrast to recent calls within urban studies for ‘new geographies of theory’; see Robinson, 2016; Roy, 2009). In studying regional processes in South Asia, it may be fruitful to incorporate such broader theories of spatialization while always keeping in view local and regional specificities.

The relational perspective in geography is similar to work in transnational and global studies, which has documented how space and place are reconstituted by globalization and transnational mobilities and flows. Anthropologists’ long-standing interest in the ‘local’ is useful for thinking through how regions are made and remade. Munn’s description of ‘regionality’ as ‘created in the experiential synthesis of local and translocal’ (1990, p. 2), for instance, resembles writings by cultural geographers on translocality (Brickell & Datta, 2011). However, anthropological theories of globalization often left the concept of region under-theorized or absorbed it into the category of the ‘local’ (Deshpande, 2003; Sivaramakrishnan & Agrawal, 2003). Nonetheless, although long-standing patterns of mobility have been central to the constitution of regions in India, the heightened velocity with which people, resources and imaginaries move across the world marks off the contemporary moment from earlier forms of circulation. As Appadurai notes, ‘the capability to imagine regions and worlds is now itself a globalized phenomenon’ (2000, p. 7). By producing new social aspirations, institutional structures, cultural identities, financial networks or political movements, transnational mobilities and diasporic involvements inflect regional social formations, economies, cultural configurations and structures of power. In exploring these questions, anthropologists have also adapted the concepts of ‘deterritorialization’ and ‘reterritorialization’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983 [1972]) to the study of globalization and migration (Appadurai, 1997). As Sheller and Urry point out, ‘the forms of detachment or “deterritorialisation” associated with “liquid modernity” (Bauman 2000) are accompanied by attachments and reterritorialisations of various kinds’ (2006, p. 210). It is not only transnational connections that inflect regional identities or aspirations, mobility within and between regions in India also produces these spaces in embodied and performative ways. Appadurai’s concept of ‘process geographies’, which views ‘significant areas of human organization as precipitates of various kinds of action, interaction, and motion—trade, travel, pilgrimage, warfare, proselytization, colonization, exile, and the like’ (2000, p. 7), is useful here. Stein (1977), focusing on Tamil Nadu, long ago pointed to the salience of ‘circulation’ and ‘flows’ for the formation of India’s regions, arguing that pilgrimages and other kinds of movements maintain connections within, and tie together, territorial spaces. Religious and other migratory routes have long shaped the cultural and social landscapes that constitute and connect ‘traditional’ regions, as particular sites carry symbolic value that resonates far beyond their immediate locales.

Scholars have also examined the making of regional imaginations through the lens of mobility by studying practices such as automobility (Joshi, 2015), pilgrimage and other kinds of travel through regional landscapes. For instance, Feldhaus explores the ‘connected places’ and ‘affective elements’ that create regional identities in Maharashtra (2003, p. 26), arguing that ‘passing through an area with one’s body, or imagining oneself—or someone else—doing so,

gives one a sense of the area as a region' (2003, p. 28). Similarly, Ibrahim's (2008) ethnography of pastoralists in Kutch, who traditionally traversed routes of devotion and trade that are now split between India and Pakistan, illustrates the multiple ways in which a region becomes meaningful to different groups, mobile as well as settled: 'Region is thus not merely about geographical limits in the secular sense, but is also deeply imbued with religious landscapes both imagined and real ...' (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 440). In addition, this 'extremely dense network of travel, trade and pilgrimage routes ... serves to successfully destabilise any fixed rendition of the region' (2011, p. 441). As Verstappen also argues in her article on Charotar (this issue), mobility may reinforce community identities and affective ties with particular places, while also challenging state-enforced political borders or conventional 'communal' or religious boundaries. In the Uttarakhand case, the ability to travel through mountainous areas cements affective ties to landscape and generates embodied politics and regional aspirations (Koskimaki, 2011, and this issue).

Expanding pathways of circular and rural-to-urban migration within India have also sharpened regional identities, for instance when local people are mobilized against migrant workers who are claimed to have monopolized employment opportunities. Such 'nativist' political movements have erupted not only in large cities such as Mumbai (Hansen, 2001) but also in provincial towns in states such as Uttarakhand, where competition for jobs has reinforced regionalist assertions in a very different way. In addition, movements of people, finance and cultural goods across and between regional spaces may inflect or produce what appear to be 'local' cultural assertions based on popular notions of regional difference (which may also draw on religious or caste identities, as discussed in the next section). The restructuring of space by regionalist politics becomes most evident when claims to territory solidify in the redrawing of official boundaries (cf. Abraham, 2003). Yet Hardy's (2015) work on Bhojpuri music and cinema shows that migration may also produce new regional imaginations not tied to particular places: the market for Bhojpuri cultural goods is mainly Bihari and Uttar Pradesh (UP) migrants living in cities such as Mumbai, creating a '*transregional migrant counterpublic that does not inhabit an exclusive territory*' (p. 161).

As we have seen, the wider connections that have shaped regions often have much older histories marked by particular patterns of circulation. But regional identities are also rooted in long-standing cultural complexes or agro-ecological formations whose 'spectres' may persist for a long time (Ludden, 2002). While historically embedded regional identities continue to be salient in popular cultural and political life, these histories alone cannot explain contemporary regionalist movements, which may appear unexpectedly or in conjunction with other kinds of politics and demands. As Cohn (1987b) pointed out, older regional identities, and the attendant production of distinctive cultural forms, live on within modernity but often in new guises. 'Territories'—both formal political units and less bounded economic or social spaces—are deeply shaped by such complex histories as well as by less obvious alignments and affiliations. This means that regional boundaries and loyalties are hardly independent of larger political forces or state power, especially in contemporary India where some parties or movements seek to homogenize regional cultures.

As a large body of work has shown, regions are made through diverse political, material and semiotic practices of place-making, which are increasingly reworked in transnational or trans-regional spaces. Provincial towns are key sites of such region-making processes, due to their position as nodes connecting their rural hinterlands with other sites as well as their long-standing trans-regional or global connections (Parthasarathy, 2013; Scrase, Rutten, Ganguly-Scrase, & Brown, 2015). More recently, provincial landscapes have been altered by ongoing processes of urbanization, which are often intersected by transnational flows and diasporic aspirations (Verstappen & Rutten, 2015; also see contributions by Upadhy and Verstappen, this issue). While migrants share the transnational 'space of flows' (Appadurai, 1997) with other actors such as multinational corporations and multilateral development agencies, their significance in shaping regionalist politics cannot be discounted. Even as people seek new avenues of employment away from traditional land-based work, they maintain and often strengthen their regional ties and identities, such that 'regional culture' begins to be articulated through transnational networks and expanded community affiliations (Upadhy & Rutten, 2012). As a result, migrants or diasporic actors may play an important role in the politics of these regional spaces. Here we need to ask how a region 'comes into being in a global or transnational public sphere' (Sivaramakrishnan & Agrawal, 2003, p. 23). Mobile actors may create transregional and virtual publics, which in turn shape contemporary identities within the region. Such politics often are pursued through the Internet and other new communication technologies in 'cross-border public spheres' (Sassen, 2004, p. 654). For example, overseas Indians frequently rely on regional media Internet portals to share and receive news, which have also become key sites for the promotion of regional cultures and languages (Heerink, 2012; Kalyanaraman & Koskimaki, 2013).

Thus, most contemporary scholars view the 'region' as a category or entity that is constantly created and reconstituted, reflecting Cohn's argument that 'regions are far from fixed enduring things' (1987b, p. 132). By understanding mobility as fundamental to social life rather than exceptional (Cresswell, 2010), positing territoriality as porous, shifting and multi-scalar, and by placing mobilities and trans-regional ties at the centre of our analysis rather than the margins, we might be better placed to analyze regional politics in India. As Sheller (2004) argues, movement allows people to maintain multiple identities and affiliations; hence, regions may be produced and reproduced by 'mobile publics', which are 'part of deeply embedded social and machinic complexes involving the infrastructures that allow for the mobilities of people, objects, and information' (Sheller, 2004, p. 40). Such mobilities are also gendered (Cresswell & Uteng, 2008), and structured by class and caste locations, just as regional identities may be shaped by generational differences (Koskimaki, this issue; Paasi, 1991). These considerations raise the question of who has access to mobility and who does not (Dalakoglou & Harvey, 2012), and how these differences impinge on the shaping of regional imaginaries.

Regional Actors: Communities and Publics

In this section we take a closer look at how India's regions are represented, produced and imagined by key actors, in particular 'communities' and 'publics'. As Paasi and Metzger recently argued, the question of 'who or what it is that "constructs" a region or what this construction means in terms of social practice or power relations' (2017, p. 22) has not been sufficiently elaborated in the literature. In India, regions have drawn the attention of social scientists mainly when they become visible in political mobilizations (Routray, 2008, p. 363; Vora & Feldhaus, 2006b); yet it is how regions become potent sources of social identity or political action in the first place that needs to be explained.⁶ As a large body of work has shown, the formation of regional identities or the realignment of regional boundaries often reflect competing interests and political agendas—of different caste, class or religious groups, provincial elites or political parties. Conversely, regional affiliations and networks may help to solidify community identities or class power, as political or religious agendas seek to capture 'the region' just as they do the 'nation' (Deshpande, 2007). This section extends this work by asking: Who are the regional elites of the contemporary moment? Who has control over regional resources, and who claims to represent the region? What are the material and symbolic mechanisms or strategies through which regions are imagined and regional publics created? Which groups have the power to alter landscapes, mobilize political symbols and shape vernacular publics? Conversely, which groups contest domination by regional elites or create visible counterpublics (Warner, 2002)?

As the foregoing discussion suggests, regionalist movements have drawn on a range of potential identities. In India, language has been the most visible and ubiquitous signifier of regional belonging, a development of the late colonial period that underwrote state reorganization after independence. Yet, the proliferation of language politics may also confound regionalism, such as in areas where 'communities' mark their differences through identification with distinct languages or dialects. Regionalist movements also intersect with community assertions based on religion, as in Punjab which came to be identified mainly with the Sikhs, collapsing religious and regional identity into one another (Jodhka, 2006) – a congruence that underwrote the separatist Khalistan movement (Axel, 2002). Regionalism may also be class or caste inflected: Mohapatra (2006) argues that 'uneven development' in the colonial period influenced the mobilization of an Odia middle class who countered discourses of regional 'backwardness'. The leadership of dominant or other caste groups 'with specific territorial pockets' (Palshikar, 2006, p. 274), and the spatial fragmentation of Dalit and OBC (Other Backward Classes) politics (p. 289) reflect enduring regional caste and social formations.

Regional politics are also embroiled in larger nexuses of power, and one's identity as being 'of the region' can be a powerful political tool – by allowing connections to be made or providing access to various kinds of political resources. Conversely, political aspirations are often articulated or fostered through a language of regional identity or cultural pride, thereby feeding into the revival or solidification of linguistic, religious or caste identities. While regionalism is usually propelled by provincial elites, such movements become successful only when they garner popular support; hence, the creation of 'passions' or affect

around regional or other cultural symbols is crucial. Regionalist movements typically deploy symbolic strategies to create a strong sense of identity between culture, language and territory, by fashioning emblems of belonging such as the new ‘mother goddesses’ that galvanized provincial struggles in southern India (Mitchell, 2009; Ramaswamy, 1997, 2006), or through the popularization of regional histories centred on heroic figures such as Sivaji in Maharashtra (Kulkarni, 2014). To understand how collectivities, such as caste groups or language-based communities, engage in ‘symbolic struggles’ over the meaning of the region and their claims of belonging, we need to attend to social and symbolic processes of region-making (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 225).

The role of caste in the formation of regional identities and regionalist movements has been surprisingly neglected, given the large literature on ‘dominant castes’ (Srinivas, 1962) – which are by definition regionally circumscribed – as well as extensive scholarly work on caste and politics in India. As M. N. Srinivas and later scholars showed, most regions of India are dominated by one or two major agrarian castes, which are usually among the most populous groups and control a large proportion of the land and other resources—advantages that in turn make them politically powerful. The regional embedding of caste was recognized by the first generation of field-based anthropologists, who mapped the spatial organization of caste through kinship and marriage networks (in contrast to earlier village-level studies of caste hierarchies; see Beck, 1972; Mayer, 1960; Pocock, 1972). Other scholars described regional agrarian systems and the emergence of provincial politics led by wealthy peasant groups (Baviskar, 1980; Washbrook, 1976), insights that have been underlined by the rise of regional political parties identified with particular agrarian castes (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2011; Witsoe, 2013).

The social structuring of regions around caste in most cases was an outcome of precolonial histories of settlement and political rule, as particular groups were granted land rights and titles by rulers. These (highly variable) regional agrarian structures and political systems were later reinforced (or in some cases altered) by the colonial state, which variously confirmed land rights already held by some groups, created a new class of ‘*zamindars*’, or helped tenant or peasant groups to become commercial farmers by investing in irrigation infrastructure or opening up new lands for cultivation. The conferral of political power on particular communities went hand-in-hand with the construction of ‘colonial regions’ created ‘to suit administrative needs’, which did ‘not necessarily taking into account the realities of geographic, historic, linguistic, economic, or other phenomenon’ (Cohen, 2014, p. 321).

Consequently, most regions came to be identified with particular landowning groups, which in turn lay claim to ‘their’ regions. In the context of colonial rule and postcolonial democratic politics, such powerful caste groups were ‘substantialized’ or transformed into self-conscious social categories and political actors (Dirks, 2001; Dumont, 1998 [1970]; Srinivas, 1996). The same castes also became key actors in state-level politics following independence, especially since the 1990s with the increasing influence of regional parties such as the Samajwadi Party of UP and the Rashtriya Janata Dal of Bihar. Although the dominant castes play a central role in state politics, they remain closely linked, socially and

economically, to particular regions within their states—Patels with Charotar, Marathas with Marathwada, and so on. In some states, political rivalry between two major castes groups has been manifested as inter-regional conflicts—Vokkaligas and Lingayats in Karnataka, Kammas and Reddys in Andhra Pradesh—highlighting the interpenetration of regional and caste identities.

Thus, the politics of regions can hardly be understood without reference to their social and political fabric, shaped by long-standing (and recently revived) formations of caste, class, religious identity and language. As the studies collected in Piliavsky (2014b) illustrate, ‘patronage’ relations (often based on inter-caste relations) are fundamental to political life in South Asia, and such relations are in turn entangled with regional affiliations. Regional social structures also serve as networks of power and accumulation that may stretch far beyond the region itself, as noted in the previous section. However, the region is not exhausted by the activities of regional elites—regional identities are diverse and contested, as multiple actors articulate different aspirations or development imaginaries, making the regional landscape politically complex and conflicted. In what Michelutti (2007) calls the ‘vernacularization of democracy’, lower caste groups (OBCs) such as the Yadavs in UP have come to build more powerful political coalitions. Dalit mobilizations have also inflected their regional contexts, such as through ‘struggles against the caste-determined social and public sphere’ in Kerala (Mohan, 2016, p. 76). But given the uneven distribution of status, influence and voice, received accounts of regional histories that accord a central role to powerful groups may invisibilize other key actors. For instance, the Charotar region is popularly identified with the landowning Patel community, but the mobile and spatially dispersed Vohra community, although marginalized by communal and state violence, forms a key part of the regional fabric based on long-standing social ties as well as mobilities (Verstappen, this issue). Similarly, the gendered nature of region-making is often neglected: situating the historical role of women in social movements in Uttarakhand ‘at the intersection of local and global networks of power’, Gururani (2014, p. 69) develops a ‘rereading of gendered resistance in this region’.

Regions are also imagined through publics and counterpublics, which are often localized in terms of language, aspiration and solidarity. As Warner argues, ‘a public ... selects participants by criteria of shared social space (though not necessarily territorial space), habitus, topical concerns, intergeneric references, and circulating intelligible forms (including idiolects or speech genres)’ (2002, p. 75). Vernacular literatures, political discourses, and news media have played a central role in the creation of regional publics in India, as a large body of work has shown. In her discussion of the role of Bengali folklore in the creation of place, Chatterji uses the term ‘region’ to ‘designate not only a geographical location but also an “ideoscape”, to use Appadurai’s (1997) apt coinage, formed by cultural flows and modes of transmission shaped by oral, print, and visual media’ (2016, p. 379). Rajagopal (2001) has drawn attention to the emergence of ‘split’ publics in India, where vernacular news has its own political framing and symbolic expressions different from those of English language media, which are also more firmly embedded in particular regions (cf. Udupa, 2015).

Studies from several regions have traced the development of ‘vernacular’ public spheres under colonial rule, linked to the creation of social identities (especially based on language) during the nationalist movement (e.g., Arunima, 2006; Mantena, 2013; Pinto, 2007). This body of work, such as Orsini’s (2002) study of the formation of a Hindi political sphere, highlights the significance of the circulation of vernacular texts and news media. Regional communities and caste groups intersect in these spheres: Naregal, for instance, discusses the role of the vernacular press in the ‘assertion of dominant cultural and political identities’ in Maharashtra (1999, p. 3446), while Satyanarayana (2016) shows how Dalit publics and literary production helped shape the Telugu public sphere. Similarly, Shaikh argues that the translation of Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* into regional Marathi idioms ‘helps us understand the vernacularisation of modern notions of class’ as workers mobilized in Mumbai in the early twentieth century (2011, p. 65). The rise of regional newspapers and print capitalism in the 1970s (Jeffrey, 2000) further contributed to the consolidation of such identities by reporting on ‘regional’ news. For example, Hindi language news reports on mobilization were a key source of information in Uttarakhand and thus played a large role in the movement for statehood (Kumar, 2011).

To sum up, diverse social actors and publics are implicated in the making of regions, in multiple and often contradictory ways. In this special issue, we explore some of the political terrain of regions through a focus on regional, transregional and mobile actors and on the ‘multivocality’ (Rodman, 1992) through which they wield power and within which they form social horizons. The ethnographic work presented here illuminates the practices and orientations of social actors on the ground and provides insights into the cultural processes and politics of region-making in ways not available through conventional social science methodologies. Building on these perspectives and methods, the aim of this special issue is not to delineate the ‘interests’ or alignments that produce regional configurations or movements, but to explore the specific mechanisms and ideological strategies through which new regional publics and identities have been produced. In the next section, we turn to a discussion of development, a major trope around which many regionalist movements have revolved.

Development and the Region

As we have seen, the idea of development has been central to the creation of regional imaginaries and politics, whether through aspirations for equity or claims about exploitation by more powerful regions—as is evident in various state autonomy movements since Independence (Sinha, 2016; Tillin, 2013). In Uttarakhand, for example, a perceived ‘lack of development’ helped instigate the movement for a separate state, achieved in November 2000 (Fiol, 2012, 2013; Mawdsley, 1998, 1999, 2002; Rangan, 1996, 2000). Similarly, the long struggle for a separate Telangana state hinged on a representation of the region as exploited and dominated by people from other regions (Maringanti, 2010). Yet ‘development’ is not an immediately transparent concept. Development, variously expressed in vernacular languages through terms such as ‘*vikas*’, not only carries diverse meanings and implications but is implemented, enacted or

politicized in very 'regional' ways.⁷ We draw here on an anthropological perspective that foregrounds the entanglements of development with aspirations for the future, which in turn are always framed by 'culture' and formed 'in the thick of social life' (Appadurai, 2004, p. 67). Development aspirations are also embedded in local political structures, forms of power and meaning, and social ethos, and in community histories, interactions and conflicts. In India, all these elements are not only regional in form and instantiation, they also contribute to the imagination and production of regions.

Economists in India have long focused on regional disparities in growth and development, and several studies illustrate the consequences of state planning, development policies and economic reforms in creating or reinforcing regional inequalities (Bagchi & Kurian, 2005; Kale, 2014; Sinha, 2005). State-led mega-projects may create and disseminate new development aspirations, which in turn foster regional aspirations. The capital-intensive development policies pursued following economic reforms have provoked various opposition movements (especially around land acquisition) and 'ecological nationalisms' (Sivaramakrishnan & Cederlof, 2005). However, Cross (2014) shows that new employment opportunities and soaring land values due to the establishment of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in northern coastal Andhra produced new desires and development imaginaries in a region often represented as 'backward', even as many people were displaced or faced uncertain futures.

Because regional identities have long been entangled with diverse future-making and development-oriented agendas, several scholars have argued for a regional perspective on questions of development, modernity and politics in India. In developing their concept of 'regional modernities', Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal suggest that the 'region' may be better understood not as a geographical category or an 'intermediate' scale of analysis, but as a conceptual tool that draws attention to 'contested histories of development' in India (2003, p. 24). Nair, in her historical account of Mysore, contends that regions are 'appropriate sites from which to begin a reconceptualization of modernity' (2011b, p. 1): the demand for a separate linguistic state of Karnataka drew not only on language politics but also on a 'development agenda that relied on geography and an imagined future defined primarily in economic terms' (2011b, p. 250). In the case of a community of Catholic fishers in Tamil Nadu, Subramanian argues that an 'open-endedness of community and place-making ... points to the impossibility of a neat correspondence between a global discourse of development and its uses and meanings in specific locales' (2003, p. 263). A regional perspective thus adds another dimension to the 'post-development' literature (Escobar, 1984; Esteva, 1992; Pigg, 1992), by unravelling the connections between the 'respatialization' of the state (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992), development agendas and politics, and regional realignments.⁸ Building on these discussions, we are interested not only in how economic and political networks are forged around the project of 'development' in India but also in projects of regional future-making.

This discussion suggests that to understand how development is entangled with demands for regional autonomy, we need to look beyond the ‘interests’ of particular actors and explore the diverse ways in which the ideology and practice of development are imbricated in regional identities and sentiments. First, autonomy movements aimed at correcting development disparities often draw on narratives of regional belonging or ‘pride’, symbols of identity, or politics that claim control over the region’s land and resources. As noted above, since the 1990s reconfigurations of power linked to development agendas have been reflected in the rising importance of regional parties on the national political landscape, whose ideological planks usually highlight perceptions of ‘neglect’ or exploitation due to their incorporation into larger political entities. For instance, Koskimaki’s (2016) work on Uttarakhand traces a regional imaginary to the crystallization of youth publics in the late colonial period, as well as to a genealogy of development aspirations often expressed through a masculine political sphere (also see Koskimaki, this issue).

Second, the region is produced through multiple discourses and practices of development, and by various actors in pursuit of varying agendas. Chaudhuri’s contribution to this issue illustrates this point: the idea of Kerala’s exceptionalism, embodied in the ‘Kerala Model’ of development and notions of ‘regional pride’, is not uniformly expressed or imagined. Urban environmentalists, state bureaucrats, political parties, tribal tour guides and tourists all play different roles in the production of the region around the idea of ‘development’. Similarly, in the case of Amaravati described by Upadhyaya, politicians are promoting the imagination of a ‘world-class’ future that is eagerly consumed by a transnationalized regional elite and provincial capital, but which makes little sense to those who are being marginalized by the capital city project.

Third, ‘development’ is often implemented through regional and transregional networks of political patronage. Patronage, an old concept in South Asian studies, remains a ‘living *moral idiom* that carries much of the life of South Asian politics, and society at large’ (Piliavsky, 2014a, p. 4). Patronage relations and other forms of brokerage enable one to ‘get things done’ or provide access to the local or regional state; hence, networks based on caste, kinship and other forms of sociality are central to regional politics. Resources for ‘development’ (often in non-inclusive forms) may be mobilized by dominant caste groups or transnationalized elites, who then become development ‘patrons’ in their home villages or communities (Roohi, 2016; Verstappen, 2016). Such practices, and the politics that are enabled by an elite-driven development agenda, may contribute to the solidification or reinvention of regional imaginaries, as economic and social capital are accumulated through trans-regional paths of circulation and get embedded in regional structures of power (see articles by Verstappen and Upadhyaya, this issue).

Finally, development is linked to regional imaginaries through particular spaces and places—especially regional towns and their rural hinterlands—which often ‘define’ or stand in for cultural regions. Development politics may build on or foster enduring tensions and contradictions within such provincial spaces, or produce competitive aspirations for modernity among various regions. For example, the imaginations of development and

ecological conservation that circulate through and around the Periyar Tiger Reserve in Kerala show how regions are made and contested at the intersection of cosmopolitan and urban worlds on the one hand, and rural and environmental landscapes on the other (Chaudhuri, this issue). Thus, the region needs to be reconsidered by mapping the new kinds of linkages that are forming between the rural and the urban due to the urbanizing and globalizing thrust of 'development'.

Conclusion

Our aim in this introductory essay has been to raise a series of questions about the 'region' in contemporary India, by focusing on mobilities and trans-regional ties, development agendas and aspirations, and the actors, publics and communities that are implicated in the (re)fashioning of regional identities and imaginaries. As the studies collected here (and earlier literature) demonstrate, the collective desire for development or political autonomy are deeply entangled in broader networks of power, accumulation or imagination. But our attempt is to think beyond political boundaries, states and languages, to examine how regional imaginaries are being refurbished and reinvented in post-liberalization, post-globalization India. To this end, we have delineated several thematic lenses which we believe are helpful for understanding regional configurations in India, where regions have fuzzy boundaries and have been shaped within colonial forms of development, anti-colonial nationalism, and debates over language and belonging. At a moment when cross-regional and transnational linkages and mobilities have become a part of everyday life in many provincial towns as well as rural areas, tracing movements and connections allows us to interrogate the idea of region beyond its spatial boundaries.

Perspectives such as the 'relational' one, which encapsulate flows and movement and recognize that multiple modernities circulate and influence agendas as well as imaginations of development, are now well accepted. In this essay, we have tried to resituate these debates within a larger understanding of regional politics in India. By viewing the region as constituted by wider networks and mobilities (both material and immaterial), a relational view contributes to its reinstatement as a key locus or modality of analysis and to a rethinking of the intersections among spatiality, social formations and circulation. Responding to calls to move beyond either/or debates, we have pointed to the re-enactment and reinvention of regionalist tendencies as a product of such mobilities and intersections.

The articles in this special issue illustrate how changing social and economic configurations, new dynamics of political power, and the entanglement of regionalist cultural politics with the politics of development (often refracted through the prisms of caste, class or gender) contribute to a respatialization and redistribution of social as well as political power. They also point to a politics of place linked to regional identities built around particular images of landscape, language, culture or history, or to an imagined community or regional homeland. Diverse communities or groups mobilize around a regional idiom in various ways, and 'regional publics' are not everywhere the same. Regional assertions draw on popular histories and cultural ideologies, but are also refashioned and rearticulated in response to other

developments at various scales. Although such movements often stem from perceptions of uneven development, their formation and strength also draw on a (trans-regional) cultural politics of place, language or community. These articles illustrate this point by showing how connections forged by regional actors with other places are central to the constitution of the region. As regionalist and development politics intersect and collide, regional landscapes and power structures are altered and in turn contribute to the reshaping India's 'fragments' (Chatterjee, 1993) and its futures.

Finally, we build on a limited body of recent work on the region in India through new case studies of particular regional formations, based on extended ethnographic research and careful analysis that attends to material as well as intangible processes of region-making. By bringing together grounded studies from different locales, this issue seeks to highlight variable dimensions of the region in contemporary India. The diversity of these contributions illustrates different ways we might further explore the making of regional imaginaries and identities as they have been asserted, revived and reconfigured in response to rapidly changing social and economic worlds. In this introductory essay, we have also tried to point to the divergent paths that open up when we begin to explore the idea and ramifications of the region in India today, from youth publics and transnational circulations to caste politics and the forging of new development imaginaries. We hope that this special issue will demonstrate the continuing conceptual salience of the region as a central, but constantly mutating, axis of social and political life in India.

Notes

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2. Marxist geographers such as Harvey (1989), Massey (1978) and Sassen (2008), drawing on Lefebvre (1991 [1974]), have focused on how space is restructured by capital and the political technologies through which it is bounded and controlled.
3. Similarly, writing on the 'geographies of ignorance' that characterized the 'area studies' approach, van Schendel (2002) argues that a division of space into 'heartlands' and 'margins' only reproduces the notion that regions are spatially fixed; instead, a view from

the 'borderlands' draws attention to 'spatial configurations that are not compact territories' (2002, p. 665).

4. To understand the contours of this debate, see Agnew (2013), Cox (2013), Holmén (1995), and Paasi and Metzger (2017).

5. This literature has focused mainly on the resurgence of regional identities or the restructuring of economic regions by neoliberal reforms. See, for example, Allen, Massey and Cochrane (1998), Jones and Woods (2013), MacLeod and Jones (2007) and Paasi (2009).

6. Vora and Feldhaus demarcate three phases of regionalism in postcolonial India: an initial phase when 'regional expressions were seen as threats to national unity' (2006a, p. 10); a second phase from the early 1970s to the 1990s when regionalist movements erupted in response to 'economic deprivation' and uneven development planning (2006a, p. 100); and the recent phase from the 1990s which has seen the increasing power of regional political parties (p. 11). Also see Cohen and Ganguly (2014).

7. While 'development' in popular and academic discourse is viewed variously as the provision of government services, improvements in infrastructure, greater access to 'modern' facilities or new employment opportunities, a transition from rural to urban life, industrialization, or as a general signifier of progress and advancement, its social meanings go much beyond measurements of 'indicators' or improvements in material or social welfare.

8. Our focus here is on the region, but we agree with Gupta that 'development' cannot have a single spatial referent, and 'can be no more "regional" or "national" than it can be "global" or "local"' (2003, p. 67).

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