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What Good Is Southern Theorising?

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The river flows from اتر *(uttar) to* دکھن *(dakkan)- north to south out to the ocean. In the stories and poems of the land of rivers, lovers plead the beloved not to head South on a boat, for they fear a long separation as the beloved travels south with the river and west to the Indian ocean world. The beloved can only return when the monsoon makes its customary return each year, as they say in Marathi नेमेची येतो मग पावसाळा. In our language of love, it is customary for lovers to ask their beloved to return home with the winds:* اب کے ساون گھر آجا *(come home this monsoon).*

In Urdu, the poor is غریب *(gharib) and the west* مغرب *(maghrib). The former in Persian means 'stranger,' the latter in Arabic means 'where the sun sets.' It makes sense that those who arrived from the west, beyond the fertile plains of the* سندھو *(River Indus) and* گنگا *(River Ganges) were strange and poor and came for the riches of this land. Those who travelled west were poor and estranged, uprooted, and living in* پردیس *(pardes), Sanskrit for an-other's homeland.*

Now that the West has taken all our wealth, the imperial scholars define poverty in relation to productivity and not in relation to land, fertility, familiarity, and home. The masses of the East (South) are indeed poor: dispossessed, displaced, dwelling in ruins. Dreaming of reaching مغرب *(maghrib)...the West. To escape their* غربت *(ghurbat)...strangeness of being.*

For centuries in the land of the rivers,[1] wind, rain, and river flows have provided for a bountiful existence for humans and non-humans alike. The North and the South used to refer to the directions of our rivers and winds, and East and West to trade routes. Songs spoke of seasons when lovers would return from foreign lands with the monsoon winds. Nature provided the basis for orienting selves and tied human endeavours to lands, waters, and other beings.

Now the world has turned upside down and spins the wrong way around, and the North is no longer the name of a cardinal direction. The North names the orientation towards the modern capitalist-colonial world. No longer a simple referent to the direction of the winds and rivers, travellers and lovers, seasons and songs. Our rivers no longer flow southwards to meet their beloved, the sea,

1 *Sapta Sindhu* – the land of seven rivers; Punjab, the land of five rivers – the land of the Indus (Sindhu) and Ganges (Ganga) river basins spread across Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Tibet, India, and Bangladesh.

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but to the new North– to those who have access and entitlements as per the dictates of the modern, (ex)colonial, capitalist, developed world. Enlisted in modern cycles of production and consumption, their bounties are extracted and exported for the Western and Northern peoples.

Capitalist modernity has estranged us from our lands. Strangers, poor, غریب (*gharib)* no longer refers to those who arrive in the bountiful land of the rivers. غریب (*gharib*) now refers to those unable to exit West through immigration, or unable to move into privileged positions in the circuits of production and distribution of modern materials and ideas. What to speak of the lovers and the beloved in tune with the flows of the rivers and the directions of the winds?

Northerners and Theory brought new ideas of modernisation, globalisation, and human ambitions, but their ideas have wrecked the planet. Southerners are kept in check, our bodies and ideas forced into a compartmentalised world – much worse than what Fanon saw.[2] Borders meant to keep Southerners in check, keep the world oriented towards the North. Easier to cross for Northerners, near impossible for estranged Southerners.

These opening lines draw from southern conversations that are rich with the potential for theorising. Conversations among activists and academics in Pakistan (and elsewhere) provide insights into what is at stake, what is important, what needs to be protected, and what needs to be done. A first step in decolonisation – the endeavour to turn the world right side up – is to locate the North and the borders that uphold the North-oriented world. Borders that constitute the North and the South: geographical, social, and epistemic borders between the core and the periphery, imperial citizens and subjects, the subaltern and the marginal, theory and praxis, academia and activism.

These conversations reflect attempts to roam free across the lands and among people that face existential threats from the Northern onslaught. We are differently engaged in the political task of decolonising the landscapes and mindscapes of the Indus Valley and beyond.[3] Conversational reflections constitute the knowledge-systems of the lifeworlds birthed by centuries of fertile mixing of humans and nature at a world-historical scale. They draw from the rich

2 Cf. Fanon 2007 [1961]. Fanon saw the compartmentalization of the colonial world as distinct from other structural differentiation as the former had visible material manifestation. But the geographical spread of North-South means that often the walls that compartmentalise are somewhat obscured from view, yet the contrasts are visibly evident.

3 Using the formulation by my colleague, Mushtaq Gaadi, who used the terms landscapes and mindscapes to refer to the subject of the two-volume collection of poems on the Sindhu Darya (River Indus) by Saraiki poet, Ashu Laal, titled *Sindh Saagar Naal Hamesha* (An Eternity with the Indus Ocean).

civilisational history of the region and give us access to the remarkable diversity of human ingenuity, with a multiplicity of languages, spiritual and intellectual traditions, poetry, songs, prose, and performances. Our conversations also bear imprints of Western or Northern knowledge, as many of us are trained in Northern and North-like academic institutions. We draw freely from all these sources, yet strive to reorient ourselves towards the South.

My concern in this paper is simple: how far can we leverage the ideas generated in southern conversations among activists and academics to theorise from the South? In a sense, I am asking to what extent the *Northness* of theory, imperial and decolonial alike, forecloses the possibility of southern theorising. Does proximity to southern struggles matter for political decolonisation – to turn the world right-side up? What is the theorising potential in reflecting on the inevitable destruction of the many souths to constantly create the North? As millions of southerners flee their homes, as billions have hardened desires to escape their ruination and estrangement by migrating to the Global North, I ask: What good is southern theorising anyway?

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It is my experience that when the term 'North' is used, it invokes mild anxieties among Northern knowledge producers, especially those serious about decolonisation. What is the North? Aren't you reproducing dichotomies and thinking in binaries? What about the souths in the North and the Norths in the South? Doesn't the focus on divides and borders ignore mobility, hybridity, and thus reinforce these borders? Most persistently, can't Northerners also decolonise?[4]

It is therefore useful to first locate the North and provide a way to evaluate the decolonising potential of the North before speaking about southern theorising.[5] The common uses of the terms North and South are ambiguous, particularly in a strict geographical sense. Historically, the terms North and South were grounded in Cold War logic. On the one hand, imperial institutions used the terms to emphasise North-South economic differences over the East-West cultural

4 I have been asked these questions primarily in academic conferences and workshops. In activist spaces, stating that the North is an orientation towards the capitalist-colonial world is usually sufficient.

5 In this section, I summarise the key points from a co-authored article that centrally focuses on Northern epistemic decolonisation (Kamal and Courtheyn, forthcoming).

differences.[6] While North is an orientation towards the capitalist-colonial world in both uses, the South is either a place yet-to-become-North (in modernisation and neoliberal globalisation theories, etc.), or an alternative vision of the good life (in dependency and post-development theories, etc.).

Instead of applying strict geographical and epistemological divides, I suggest using a relational approach. The North is imbued with a *Northness of being* – a relational quality along three axes of location, position, and vocation. As *location*, Northness defines where we are in the upside-down world. Locational Northness does not simply refer to geographical coordinates but to our place in the network of unequal nodes and asymmetrical interconnections that extend Northness to all parts of the globe. But there's undoubtedly a discernible and strong correlation between geography and Northness.

Our location overdetermines our place in the North-oriented world – a world with old and new Europes at its centre and the destruction of a variety of other ways of being as its purpose. These other ways may not be without their own significant violences, but the North-centric world is premised on an unsustainable violence and an unprecedented domination of nature. Being Northern, as imperial citizens and residents, results in higher valuation of labour, higher consumption, and greater life prospects due to an overexposure to accumulated wealth. Being Southern, as imperial subjects and refugees, results in lower valuation of labour and emaciated life prospects due to an overexposure to the death and destruction that sustains Northern prosperity. Being Northern is activity, brands, products, experiences, and theories. Being Southern is work, raw materials, artefacts, and data.

Of course not everyone gets the same share in Northern wealth, and *Northness as position* emphasises differential distribution in a given society. In other words, Northness of location determines the field of possible social positions, and the Northness of position determines one's place in a given field. In this sense, most of the categories of sociological and anthropological analyses deal with issues of position – race, class, gender, and sexuality as well as caste, tribe, religion, ethnicity, etc. A variety of theories and epistemologies are used for the analysis of these categories. Most emphasise identity, marginality, and inclusion, while some focus on the negative space of alterity.[7]

Vocational Northness is directly tied to knowledge production. It refers to the power of Northern academics to distinguish theory from culture, the universal

6 Dados and Connell (2012) and Third World intellectuals linked the term to colony-metropole and core-periphery divides, also see Prashad 2007; Prashad 2012; Dirlik 2007.
7 Beverley 2000; Spivak 1988.

from the particular, and disciplinarity from area expertise.[8] Northern academics authorise such distinctions through institutionally sanctioned performances of grant writing, fieldwork, hypothesis testing, theorising, workshopping, peer reviews, and so on. When southern-located and -positioned individuals theorise, they can only do so on the terms established by Northern vocational standards.

While a preliminary sketch, this conceptualisation of North and Northness can highlight certain characteristics of academic decolonisation. For our purposes, we can use a stylistic schema to focus on three important moments of epistemic decolonisation: three ruptures of colonial conquest, postcolonial arrivals, and transnational convergences. Simply stated, the first rupture birthed Theory and anti-colonial thought, the second decentred Theory and appropriated anti-colonial thought for post/decolonial critique, and the third challenged academia by centring knowledge produced by ongoing anti-imperial movements across the Global South. In a sense, the first rupture emphasises the locational aspect of Northness, the second positional, and the third, vocational.[9]

The schema highlights several issues with projects of Northern epistemic decolonisation. The first issue is a consequence of the first and second ruptures, which introduced a gap between Northern epistemic and Southern political decolonisation. Modern social theory was an outcome of the first rupture of colonial conquest, grounded in the reflections on modernity by some (dead) bearded white men who sometimes ignored and sometimes supported colonialism. Anti-colonial thought also emerged at this time. But the Northness of Theory was effectively challenged during the second rupture, when many later-influential scholars of southern origin migrated to the global North. The moment of *postcolonial arrival* made the *postcolonial arrived* – scholars such as Said, Spivak, Bhabha, Hall, Mignolo, Escobar and others who, as per Arif Dirlik, signalled the conquest of Northern academia by Third World (read: Southern) intellectuals.[10] The postcolonial (and decolonial) theorists critiqued Theory and diversified it by bringing southern anti-colonial thought into the Academy, anointing it with the status of theory proper. Fanon is perhaps the most obvious example of this transformation. In effect, if the first conquest was located in the colonies and primarily amidst political struggles, the second was Northern in vocation and location.

This shift had some consequences, none more significant than the primacy of issues of position. While waves of colonisation and imperial rule continued in the ex-colonies, most arrived scholars were distanced and disconnected from the

8 Cf. Connell 2018; Jazeel and McFarlane 2007; Rehbein, Kamal and Asif 2020.
9 These are detailed in Kamal and Courtheyn (forthcoming).
10 Dirlik 2002.

actual struggles of the people in the South. In a sense, while the *postcolonial who arrived* provided a foundational critique of elite and nationalist (mis-)representation of the subaltern, they themselves produced high-theory concepts to attempt to represent the subaltern from afar. Their conquest of academia did not counter the earlier waves of colonial conquest, but arguably contributed to ongoing colonial processes. As Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui puts it, they built "pyramidal structures of power and symbolic capital... creating a jargon, a conceptual apparatus, and forms of reference and counterreference that have isolated academic treatises from any obligation to our dialogue with insurgent social forces."[11] Decolonisation became a metaphor,[12] and even elite theorists with power and symbolic capital did not shy away from claiming a marginal (and subaltern) status.[13] Arguably, the problem is endemic, as the neoliberal university is now recruiting to diversify its workforce, just as other societal actors that even include missile-making and fast fashion capitalist multinationals.[14]

A necessary corrective emerged in the third rupture of *transnational convergence*. If the first rupture emphasised South as location, the second South as position, the third rupture emphasised South as a vocation. It was in a way a direct response to the critique of the impact of armchair decolonial/postcolonial scholarship and a recognition that Northern hegemony is centrally tied to the Academy. It refined the critique of the political economy of knowledge and posited activists and communities-in-resistance as valuable sites of knowledge production. The 1994 Zapatistas' take over in Chiapas was a watershed moment, and their subsequent *encuentros* source-springs of transnational anti-globalisation movements represented in the likes of the Seattle protests and the World Social Forum.[15] Movement thinking inspired scholars who geared up to retrieve subaltern knowledges, southern epistemologies, and pluriversal ontologies – celebrating place-based resistance.[16] Arguably, many northern scholars worked closely with activists and social movements across the global souths and made invaluable contributions to these projects of southern emancipation.

Yet, the theorising from the third encounter strangely led to a fetishisation of both the strictly local and the ethereally planetary or transnational. Many Northern decolonisers mistook their own ability to cross and transcend imperial

11 Rivera Cusicanqui 2012, 97–98.
12 Tuck and Yang 2012.
13 Mignolo 1999, 239–40.
14 Shringarpure 2020.
15 Santos 2006; Zibechi 2004.
16 Blaser 2014; Escobar 2018; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Santos 2018.

borders with the epistemic and ontological possibility of disregarding borders in their work. Dialogue, convergence, exchanges, and connectivities became the primary and celebrated mechanisms for epistemic decolonisation. Many academics turned to the heuristics of 'without' or 'beyond' borders – book titles with activists, feminists, doctors, justices (... investors, businesses...) beyond/without borders – making it hard to tell apart the detractors of neoliberalism from their proponents. Some celebrity 'decolonising' theorists saw good in the relentless expansion of markets, technology, and consumerism,[17] while others abandoned projects focused on the subaltern to speak of a united common humanity.[18] The colonial encounter seemed to shift – but not from the south to the North, as in the second rupture, nor back to the South, but to an ethereal transnational, global and planetary space.

Today's southern condition has arguably shifted due to a new conjuncture – not of conquest, arrival or convergence, but one that is best classified as southern isolation or ruination. The current conjuncture does not follow a linear path from conquest to arrival to convergence, but rather contains the overlapping, intersecting and recurring effects of prior ruptures on projects of epistemic decolonisation. Those interested in epistemic decolonisation must attend to this new southern condition.

The theory of Northness can be applied, not to generate a list of the good and bad decolonisers but to delineate a schematic genealogy of Northern projects of epistemic decolonisation. The goal here is to attend to the particular conditions that enable and limit projects of epistemic decolonisation. It would be a mistake to take this theory of Northness as a critique of all projects of decolonisation based in Northern circuits of knowledge production and theorising. Neither does it mean that the only good decoloniser is a southern decoloniser. Northness here is not an identity, but a relational quality, a tendency. To question whether Northerners can decolonise is a pragmatic question of understanding the challenges of position, location, and vocations. The value of contemporary decolonisation projects in the global North is not self-evident, and it might as well be furthering Northern orientation. Perhaps thinking about southern theorising can help elucidate this point.

17 Mignolo 2012, 287.
18 Chakrabarty 2014.

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Southern theorising entails southern interpretations of southern sources, interpretations that attend to southern societal conditions and can be developed into theoretical concepts to be tested, generalised, and deployed elsewhere. It is one of the ways of generating what can be classified as Southern Theory. Theorising is a question of practice and Theory of product. Thus, hypothetically speaking, we can generate the product of Southern Theory without the practice of southern theorising as defined here. However, I believe that unless we practise southern theorising we are likely to continue to produce theories imbued with a certain Northness.

Let's consider the three most common ways of generating southern theory, defined as theory oriented against the destructive tendencies of the North: internal critiques of Northern Theory; theorising from 'pre-colonial' texts and oral sources; and theory deriving from southern reflections on the colonial encounter. In a sense, these capture the interiority, exteriority, and the interactions of the North-South epistemic divide.

The first path to southern theories is the realm of postcolonial and decolonial critique from the interiority of Northern theory. I have discussed some of the limitations of these in the previous section and elsewhere (Kamal and Courtheyn, *forthcoming*). Even a cursory reading of decolonisation literature shows that most of its proponents draw from the critical and radical traditions of the global North – Said's critique of Marx and Orientalist literature does not need any philosophical or theoretical grounding in southern intellectual traditions; Spivak's analysis of the subaltern is primarily developed through a critical engagement with Marxism, poststructuralism, and feminism. The critique has demonstrably generated 'southern' concepts – for instance, the subaltern and coloniality. However, the primacy of position and struggles for gaining social capital in Northern society can imbue these theoretical endeavours with a certain Northness. What of these is southern is then a question of context-specific testing and southern evaluation.

The second generative source of southern theorising includes a variety of pre-colonial texts and oral traditions.[19] Pre-colonial texts and traditions have always been important for modern scholarship, but orientalist readings relegated these largely to the realm of culture, or viewed them as, at best, philosophical

19 Here the 'pre' must be read in the sense of 'before the effects of colonialism,' and, in that sense, one can argue that the term is not strictly chronological, in the same vein as the 'post' in postcolonial.

and political treatise. Recent scholars have argued for the theorising potential of these sources, both to counter universalist claims of Western social theories and to generate alternative discourses. For instance, Farid Alatas uses the sociological observations of Ibne-Khaldun to contrast the usual social distinction of urban/rural against *umran badawi/hadari* – a distinction between nomadic and settled folks.[20] Similarly, by considering ideas of the individual and community in Yoruba ritualistic poetry, Akinsola Akiwowo attempted to produce a southern theory relying on sources and texts that were neither used by nor accessible to Northern theorists.[21]

The third important source of southern theorising is born out of the colonial encounter. We can see two representative approaches to this. The first is exemplified by Raewyn Connell's 'antipodal reflections' on Ali Shariati, Al-Afghani, and Raul Prebishc. Connell proposes generating southern theoretical concepts by analysing southern reflections on the colonial encounter.[22] In general, this approach seeks to excavate theories from the works of elite colonial intellectuals like DuBois, Fanon, Senghor, Gandhi, Iqbal, and others. The second approach relies on the analysis of collective texts and collective action, which represent those types of intellectual production of decolonisation that cannot be reduced to the authority of certain renowned southern intellectuals. Instead, this approach relies on the distinction between individual and collective intellectual production, and even questions the general attribution of collective thought to certain individuals – generally male and elite.[23] Recent examples of this line of work include several essays from the four volumes of *Asking, We Walk* edited by Corrinne Kumar,[24] the pluriversal conceptual dictionary by Kothari et al.,[25] and collections of knowledges born out of movements such as the texts produced by the Zapatistas.[26]

These three possible pathways may not always generate a Southern Theory, or multiplicities of southern theories. For instance, the projects of 'connected' or global sociologies[27] are consistent with Northern attempts to diversify and expand the sociological canon by including southern perspectives, but from the concerns of Northern (and imperial) societies. In such cases, theories may be

20 Alatas 2014.
21 Akiwowo 1986.
22 Connell 2007.
23 Ahmad 2022.
24 Kumar 2007.
25 Kothari et al. 2019.
26 Cf. EZLN 2016; ELZN 2019.
27 Bhambra, Nisancioglu and Gebrial 2018.

southern (anti-colonial) in one context but Northern in another – for instance, theories of social stratification developed by southern movements in ex-settler, now-imperial societies like the USA, can create a decolonial hegemony and academic dependency when applied to the ex-colonial, now semi-colonial societies like Pakistan. This transformation of what is decolonial in one context to imperial in another occurs primarily through vocational Northness. Most scholars who want to generate southern theory might be aware of issues of academic dependency, yet their reliance on institutionally sanctioned performances of research and theorising can further these dependencies. We see this type of dynamics emerge even among many renowned 'southern theorists' of today. Disagreements can be generative, but may have limited value if they are guided by vocational loyalties to the Northern Academy.

My way to sort out these debates is to go back to the issue of the Northness of these projects, and to call for southern theorising. Theorising is a matter of practice. I share Alatas and Chen's calls for a comparative and cross-fertilising analysis of southern societies with shared historical experiences and conceptual vocabulary. I am attracted to calls for retrieving social movement texts, subaltern voices, and oral traditions as repositories of other knowledges. But all this requires moving away from vocational Northness to southness – particularly by practising theorising with social movements and activists who are fighting an existential battle against the North.

However, the focus on theorising amidst ongoing southern struggles must avoid the traps of reactionary nationalism and cultural relativism. Such problems have marred past attempts of 'indigenising sociology,' for instance.[28] Anti-colonial theorising cannot rely on past or oral traditions to showcase cultural superiority – this can lead to orientalism-in-reverse.[29] Such attitudes are demonstrable in those who refer to Vedic sciences or Quranic suras, for instance, and claim that Western scientific discoveries were already present in these ancient and sacred texts. Sometimes these are right-wing, fascist, nationalist, and culturalist interpretations of southern societies based on civilisational distinctions even if demonstratively non-Eurocentric. Sometimes even well-established Northern scholars are seduced by the musings of those hell-bent on presenting their South as better than the North.[30]

28 Patel 2021.

29 Al-Azm 2010.

30 For instance, Walter Mignolo's recent endorsement of a Hindu fascist scholar, or western scholars' celebration of fascist Islamist ideologues tend to fall into this trap of romanticizing the 'Southern' even with their demonstrable affinity with the violence of capital-colonialism. Cf.

Projects of Southern theorising must keep the North in view, unravelling its impact and overcoming the challenges faced by southern scholars. They require renewed vigour and infrastructural investments in southern universities and amidst southern movements. While Southern theorising is, by necessity, anti-colonial, the concepts generated must also be debated and evaluated for their worth to ongoing struggles, and to the people who have existential stakes in these projects. Let me return to the river to make some final observations.

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ندی مردی ہے تاں سڑ مترا
اکھیں مردیاں ہن دل مردی ہے
سونہہ مردی ہے وسوں اپڑی دی
نیلے پاڑیاں دی گھل مردی ہے
جوڑا ہنساں دا ہک نئیں مردا
پورے دریا دی کھل مردی ہے

When the river dies, my dearest listen!
The eyes die, the heart dies
The life of our lifeworlds dies
The slumber of blue water dies
It's not just a pair of swans that dies
But the laughter of the entire river dies.

These lines from Saraiki poet Ashu Laal lament the death of the rivers in the land of the rivers. When the river dies... what is river death? Many think of river death in terms of pollution and biodiversity loss. Ashu won't disagree, but he will point to modern irrigation started by the British colonisers and continued by the World Bank in pursuit of the 'green revolutions' – in the 20th century 'green' meant intensive capitalist agriculture, and in the 21st century it means mega-dams to 'fight' climate change.

When does a river die? My dearest listen... when it stops flowing... when it is dammed, diverted, and fragmented to support modern lifestyles, capitalist accumulation, and the ongoing colonisation of the lands and peoples of the Indus Valley. As fisher activist Muhammad Ali Shah puts it, the river dies when it is imprisoned and cannot reach its beloved – the ocean, its final destination.

Sundar and Mukherjee 2022.

And what happens when a river dies? My dearest listen, says Ashu, our eyes die, our hearts die. And when our eyes die, can we still see and when our hearts die can we still feel? River deaths are visible across the globe, but unlike Climate Change, which is perhaps top of the list in the current anxieties of Northerners, the death of a river doesn't travel beyond the valley. It is not planetary, yet not entirely local either. The death of a river is not captured by Northern theoretical endeavours.

The technology for harvesting air and oceans for freshwater is likely to improve and provide new sources of irrigation to fill the lavish plates of a Northern diet. But river deaths will affect those whose hearts will also die. The سوں of our وسوں... the life of our lifeworld, the grounds of our community, the gathering of our togetherness, will die. And it's not simply a matter of the extinction of a species, nor of low scores on the biodiversity indices, but the loss of the laughter of the entire river.

One cannot be reasonable and be against biodiversity indices and scientific knowledge about the diversity of species and their habitats. Concepts like 'hydrosocial,' generated from Northern social sciences, appear to have some influence in natural sciences as well – a decolonising of sorts. Recent work on indigenous cosmologies explores *buen vivir* via alternative and post-developmental models to provide plenty of space for concepts such as 'river life,' 'water is life,' and, in that sense, river health and river death. But of what value is Ashu Laal's lament for the dead river? What value and for whom... for Northerners, southerners, all humanity, the colonised, the arrived? If you ask Ashu, the lament only has value if it leads to the return of life to the river. If that path comes from secular-scientific interventions, well and good. If sacred-tradition knowledge practices can revive the river, our eyes will see again, our hearts will love again.

Ashu's lament lies at the exteriority of Northern epistemologies. But reflections on what constitutes the interiority of Northern theories can also lead to the river – another path to southern theorising. We can take apart theories grounded in European histories and geographies, and confront them with southern conditions. In my work, I have attempted to do so with the theory of river enclosure, drawing from classical theory of land enclosures by Marx and Polanyi and its later uses in the study of new waves of landgrabbing, gene enclosures, patenting, and food sovereignty movements. Starting with a very basic insight that land enclosures in England do not provide an effective model of land enclosures in India and much of the world, I took inspiration from Ashu's verses and river activists in Pakistan and asked: what if we put rivers in the centre of the analyses of land enclosures?

Centring rivers instead of land has enormous generative potential. If Polanyi argued that the Great Transformation in state-society relations came through the

double movement of land enclosures and resistance, one can argue that the view from the south and colonies like British India, Egypt, Australia, and the western United States all demonstrate that the great transformation in land-use and property regimes was only possible by damming, diverting, and in the long run, destroying rivers. While I don't want to go into the details of this theory, some insights immediately emerge. Unhinging the idea of enclosure from land to apply it to rivers draws on a variety of imperial and decolonial theoretical views. From Karl Wittfogel's orientalist view, one can surmise that large irrigation systems in the Orient (India, China) require authoritarian regimes, and from his critics, like Steven Lansing, we learn that the decentralised nature of large irrigation systems in Bali did not require authoritarian centralised states. Donald Worster's work in the western United States shows (despite not claiming it as such) how large irrigation bureaucracies were key to colonial and postcolonial states' establishment of strong centralised control over land and rivers, and so on. One can argue that a theory of river enclosure emphasises the role of authoritarian state and colonial extraction, whereas the theory of land enclosure predicts the arrival of markets and a welfare state. Centering rivers then decenters some of the fundamental debates in modern political economic theories.

Finally, the study of river defence movements can also contribute to current scholarly debates on the notion of indigeneity, alliance formation, the transformation of identities under shifting natural worlds, and ideas of people's sovereignty and law to dismantle states' power performatively through traditional practices. In this analysis of the exteriority, interiority and interactions of the North-south epistemic divide, we can start with simple questions, like: why do some defend rivers while others do not? The answers require full treatment not possible here, but it is worth pointing out that in stories of river activism there's a mix of strategic, creative and meditative choices by activists. One thing that stands out in the comparative analysis of river movements is that activists need to rely on a lot of creativity to be heard and not subalternised. They often do so by investing in a variety of informal and movement infrastructure, and wrestling with issues of representation and self-representation.

I have outlined some preliminary attempts at southern theorising, focusing on rivers, using three types of approaches – reading oral traditions (Ashu's lament), confronting Northern theory with southern conditions (river enclosures), and studying activists creative, strategic, and meditative rationalities. Let me quickly point to some of the challenges of transforming the poetry, meditations and conversations of southern intellectuals and activists into theory proper.

First, despite increased recognition of poetry as a potential source, and of activists as knowledge makers, the transformation of their thought into theory still faces some Northern challenges. For instance, when Akinsola Akiwowo

attempted to generate sociological concepts from Yoruba poetry, other Yoruba speaking scholars objected. Such debates are useful when they are generative, and not when they foreclose the possibility of further elaboration and development of preliminary theories. What interests me is not so much the debate itself, but Raewyn Connell's analysis of it in Chapter 5 of her *Southern Theory*.[31] Connell, not being versed in Yoruba, can only rely on the authoritative commentary of native scholars, and limits her analysis to the difficulty of generating concepts from oral and poetic traditions due to the ambiguities, uncertainties, and in some sense the untranslatability of these works. All in all, Connell's discussion is representative of perhaps the best a non-native scholar can offer due to their limited linguistic abilities and understanding of sociological context. The challenge of untranslatability becomes foundational to Marisol de la Cadena's study of Andean indigenous cosmologies.[32] While Connell could provide limited commentary on the actual sociological or philosophical content, Cadena uses a 'non-dualistic' heuristic of 'not only' to signify the limits of her understanding, particularly when her interlocutor (subject?) Nazario refuses to explain certain things or when de la Cadena reaches the limits of her comprehension because of her weak knowledge of Quechua language. In both the cases, untranslatability becomes an issue, but only since the two books, written in English, are written primarily for Connell and Cadena's Northern interlocutors. The potential for southern theorising is rather left unexplored.

Issues of language and translation take on an added significance when we move away from concerns of vocational northness and locate the southern works in their complex contexts of political decolonisation. Language politics in the southern context are complex, and translation for Northern audiences is replete with challenges. For instance, two North-located projects on Punjab's colonial history, one literary and one in political ecology, subsumed Saraiki language and lands into Punjabi language and administrative division. Arguably, the Saraiki movement is a recent phenomenon, not covered in colonial texts, but the books were published in the last decade when the movement was visible and growing rapidly.

Furthermore, the multi-layered histories of linguistic colonisation mean that many non-European languages may be considered imperial impositions in some cases – for instance, the Arabisation and Persianisation of Indus Valley languages, the hegemony of Urdu as the national language in Pakistan, or the relegation of Saraiki to a dialect of Punjabi. Whose authority are we going to trust now in

31 Connell 2007.
32 De la Cadena 2015.

the selection of local languages – Northern scholars, the State or the dominant if not hegemonic social forces? Are the prioritised languages determined simply by what is on offer in Northern language training schools? Is it up to the preferences of individual scholars?

Demands for translation and then notions of untranslatability or incommunicability hint at the Northness of such projects. In contrast, consider that Ashu's verses are generated in a particular context, and read, sung, debated, and even challenged in the context of a dynamic Saraiki decolonisation movement. A southern theorising project can clearly emerge from there, but it would require significant investments by those who are located in proximity to these movements – both insiders that identify as Saraiki, and outsiders who may speak the language or understand the historic context of the emergence of these thoughts and ideas. The value of Ashu's words is already recognised, though not without criticism, in the Saraiki decolonisation movement. Can we imagine the conversation amidst activists as a spring and source of Southern theorising, before asking of what value it is for Northerners?

Another problem confronts us if we are to think of the 'river enclosure' as a contribution to globalising sociological analysis. While the idea of putting rivers at the centre of the analysis of enclosures may appeal to many Northern academics, others demand rigour in terms of engagement with the very broad and wide literature on enclosures and proximate concepts such as accumulation by dispossession, food sovereignty, land-use shifts, hydrosocial cycles and so on. This is usual academic practice, and valued. But most of these concepts were developed using Northern cases or Eurocentric theories to begin with. Further, their use in academic literature is demonstrably ambiguous and often contradictory.[33] There's then an overproduction of concepts in Northern theorising, often shallow and ambiguous; yet their power is established less by their explanatory merit and more by their authoritative academic performance. Market principles of supply and demand apply to academic labourers, and increasingly result in the familiar crisis of overproduction. Generating southern theory via southern theorising in this context is costly and southerners are incentivised to simply apply and test existing theories. It also requires significant labour to convince Northerners of the value of novel theorising attempts and they lack the contextual knowledge to ascertain this value.

The burden of southern theorising is also to confront these challenges of linguistic labour, translatability, and overproduction, along with issues that others have pointed out: extraversion, academic dependence, captive mind,

33 Das 2017.

gharbzadegi, colonised mind, orientalism in reverse, and so on (in works by Paulin Hountoundji, Hussain Alatas, Jalal Al-i Ahmad, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Sadik Al-Azam, etc.).[34]

If the condition of southness is a Northern creation through the destruction of a variety of lifeworlds and ways of living the good life, then southern theorising seeks to reflect both on this destruction and the possibility of existence. It is a response to the death and destruction of rivers, a fight against enclosures of nature, a call to regain our linguistic plurality, a desire to engage in dialogue and conversations with southern peoples. But to do so, we need investments in southern infrastructure for theorising. Infrastructure that avoids the traps of the locational, positional, and vocational Northness. That counters the reduction of southern intellectual production to culture, or to mere particularities that do not have universal or multiversal potentials. That counters the overproduction of Northern theory and creates space for southern dialogues and conversations. That puts the theories to test not in closed rooms and academic halls, but amidst the people who have existential stakes in southern struggles. That can provide some autonomy to southern thinkers and prevent their subsumption in state-sanctioned ideas of indigeneity or nativity, or North-oriented ideas of globality, connectivity, or planetarity. That draws lessons from riverine activists who use strategy and pragmatism, coupled with creativity and meditations. That can develop, refine, and transform thought, prose, poetry, and embodied performances into theory.

Otherwise, what good is southern theorising after all?

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34 Hountoundji 1995; Ahmad 1962; Alatas 1974; Thiong'o 1981; Al-Azm 2010.

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