
UNIT 1: SOUTH ASIA AS A REGION

Structure

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The present unit seeks to introduce South Asia as a region through its multiple characteristics and features. Understanding South Asia as a region is important for the students to learn its internal and external situation, particularly in relation to other regions. After completing this unit, you would be able to

- Explain what is meant by the term region and sub-region; and how South Asia fits in either of these categories
- Understand South Asia from a geographical perspective, particularly its size, demography, borders
- Know how the idea of South Asia as a region evolved from a strategic point of view
- Understand the region from political, economic and strategic perspective.
- Look at some parallel formulations to construct the idea of South Asia as a region.
- Explain the status of South Asia in terms of its Human Development Indices and the prospects for economic growth in future.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

South Asia as a region, exemplifies the classical definition of what constitutes a region. As per the conventional interpretation, a region refers to a landmass consisting of several nation states, which are bound together by a common or contiguous geography, connected through historical and civilizational linkages, overlapping linguistic and cultural identity and institutionalized form of a regional cooperation mechanism. Such a region has the capacity to show itself as distinct from other regions and does not preclude the existence of sub-regions within.

Not only has South Asia had contiguous and common geographical characteristics that have shaped its internal and external political geography, overlapping of different ethnic, linguistic and cultural identities have made modern South Asia what it is. Constituted of countries including Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, while the region is weak in its institutionalized cooperative linkages, the nations by and large stand at similar levels of human development and economic growth indicators.

While earlier the region was known more as 'Indian subcontinent' in the colonial context or 'Southern Asia' implying region to the south of Asia, it got its current usage at a much later date. The term 'South Asia' in terms of its academic genesis lies in area study departments developed in the west (primarily US) to study Indic thought and culture as well as connotation by the US state department of regions based on their strategic calculations. However now, the term is routinely used as a sub-regional entity in multilateral institutions (IMF, World Bank, WTO, UN etc.) and got further formalized with the creation of South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

1.2 GEOGRAPHY OF SOUTH ASIA

South Asia is one of the most populous regions in the world, with its population of 1.88 billion constituting nearly one fourth of the world's total population. This population is regionally dispersed in terms of its ethnic, linguistic and religious features across the entire subcontinent. The geographical spread of the region too is quite dispersed and distinct across with the northern belt characterized by the Himalayan belt, and the Southern peninsula characterized by the Deccan plateau with the Indo-Gangetic and desert plain interspersed in between. These three features intersect the political boundaries between the states of South Asia, thereby making them part of the same geological template. Besides, the island states (Sri Lanka and Maldives) and landlocked states (Afghanistan, Nepal and Bhutan) have their own unique sets of geographical features which impinge on their interaction with the outside world.

Common geography and contiguous boundary often create problems of political nature which have often plagued inter-state relations in South Asia. For example cross boundary river water sharing between India and Pakistan (Indus river) and India –Bangladesh (Ganges river) at one point created frictions which were subsequently resolved through negotiated and

consensus through Indus Waters Treaty (1960) and Ganges Water Sharing treaty (1996). Common/open borders between India and other countries often have been a source of illegal migration and trafficking apart from providing a conduit for terrorism/insurgency from across the state. Demarcation of maritime borders too has been problematic with disputes such as India- Sri Lanka Dispute over Palk Straits and India Bangladesh maritime dispute in Bay of Bengal Area.

Asymmetry of size within South Asia is another feature which states have to contend with as India occupies nearly three fourth of the landmass, seventy percent of the population and equal percentage of the resources. Despite the inherent diversity and disparity, commonalities of geography in the region impacts all countries in an equal measure and therefore pushes the need for the nations to frame collaborative strategies to counter challenges like climate change, cyclones, floods and earthquakes.

1.3 HISTORY OF SOUTH ASIA

Modern South Asia is an outcome of the political and administrative structures that got created during the British colonial rule. However the region cannot be entirely disconnected with the ancient and medieval influences that have had a bearing on its distinct identity, culture and religion. Being home to the Indus Valley civilization, one of the oldest civilizations in the world, the region also saw the influences of Aryan Vedic period, emergence of Buddhism, impact of the Islamic rule, followed by the British colonialism as significant factors in shaping its present political identity.

The Indus valley civilization, considered to be a bronze age civilization inhabited the north western region of South Asia from 2600 BC to 1900 BC, centred around the basins of Indus river in what now constitutes modern Pakistan. The civilization was known for its urban planning, drainage system, brick houses, metallurgy and handicrafts. Among the major sites of the Indus Valley civilization were Harappa and Mohan Jo Daro. Some of the recent scientific (genetic) studies have concluded that single largest genetic contributor to the people living in South Asia today is people from the population of which the Indus Valley Civilization individual was a part.

The Vedic period, coincides with the later Bronze Age spread from north western part of the subcontinent to the Indo Gangetic plain during 1500 BC to 500 BC and saw the composition of Vedas, the Hindu scriptural texts which gave an insight into the society, polity and practice prevalent during the times. The period coincided with a more settled agricultural life of the inhabitants across new cities and states with distinct social stratification across 'varnas'. The later Vedic period led to emergence of 'Sramanic' movement— which were non-Vedic movements - like Buddhism and Jainism, which espoused renunciation, asceticism and enlightenment. From its initial expanse in the Northwestern part of the subcontinent, subsequently Buddhism spread to Ceylon and South East Asia and China, creating its own region-specific characteristics and philosophies in the process.

The arrival of the Islam in the subcontinent, initially through the invading armies of Arabs, Turks and Mongols and later its political consolidation under the Mughal rule created a politico-religious order superimposed

on the sub-continental plane, which gave South Asia its contemporary multicultural identity. South Asia's ethnic and linguistic mosaic got shaped and influenced by these countervailing influences, which were not always accommodative, but often an outcome of wars and conflicts. Subsequently, the British Colonial rule, lasting for more than two hundred years, on one hand created the basis of administrative and legal identity of modern South Asia, at the same time emergence of the nationalist movement and the subsequent partition of the subcontinent based on communal lines created a post colonial fissure that continues to plague the region till date. The major flashpoints in South Asian politics in the post colonial period, including India-Pakistan strife, Bangladesh Liberation, Sinhala-Tamil strife in Sri Lanka, insurgency in the North East, all are in some way or the other an outcome of the kind of politics that got played out during the colonial period and its legacy, which the post colonial states in South Asia could not effectively address. The same will be elaborated in the next section.

1.4 POLITICS IN SOUTH ASIA

Politics in South Asia in the post colonial period has expressed some common yet distinct features. The commonality has often been seen in terms of the Westminster style of Parliamentary system that most of the countries have at different points of time followed and the nature of party system and political mobilization. The distinctiveness has been more in terms of the political processes of managing religious, caste, ethnic and linguistic diversities and how at times centralization of power and authority has been attempted to contain this diversity leading to volatile politics in the region. While in the recent years, electoral democracy and democratic politics has shown an apparent maturing in South Asia, the undercurrent of authoritarian politics undermining the same always remains. The thematic frames under which politics in South Asia can be studied include the following:

1.4.1 Form of Government

Being influenced to a great extent by the colonial history, most countries in South Asia opted for following a Westminster model of Parliamentary Democracy with bicameral legislature, following adoption of new constitutions in their respective countries after independence. Some countries on the other hand followed the quasi -Presidential system, with there being direct elections for the President, who in turn acts as executive head of the state as well as the government. Further to this, there were stages when some South Asian countries also experimented with Constitutional monarchy later replaced with parliamentary system. Some of the countries also have had a long periods of military rule; or where military remained a significant political actor in politics.

India has followed the Parliamentary system of government with federal characteristics, there being well defined distribution of powers between the centre and the states. The Upper house of the Parliament is known as Rajya Sabha, the 'Council of States' and the Lower house as the Lok Sabha. The Prime Minister and his cabinet are accountable to the Parliament, with the President being the Head of State.

Pakistan too has a parliamentary system with bicameral legislature, the Senate as the upper house and the National Assembly as the lower house. While in the initial years, Pakistan had a semi-Presidential form of government, coinciding with increasing role of military in government, the powers of the President were curtailed via 18th amendment in 2010.

Bangladesh has a unicameral legislature called Jatiya Sansad, from which Prime Minister and his/her cabinet are appointed by the President. The electoral constituencies in Bangladesh are decided on the basis of Districts with specific populations.

The Federal Parliament of Nepal too is having a bicameral legislature with the House of Representatives having direct elections from constituencies across its seven provinces and National Assembly consisting of members elected by Electoral College from the provinces. The office of the President was created in 2008 after monarchy was abolished in Nepal and the same acts as the head of the state. Prime Minister is head of the government and must enjoy the confidence of the majority of the members of the House of Representative to remain in office.

Sri Lanka has a system of a semi Executive Presidency, adopted after the 1978 Constitution, where he/she is the powerful head of the state as well as the government and the prime minister acts as his/her deputy. While earlier Sri Lanka had a bicameral legislature, in 1972 it was made unicameral with the abolition of senate with the National State Assembly or the current Parliament being the only house now.

Maldives is having a Presidential form of government with a unicameral legislature, with the President being in complete control of the state and the government. From a unicameral system, Bhutan became a bicameral system in 2007, with the National Council as the upper house and the National Assembly as the lower house. As a Constitutional Monarch, the king appoints the Prime minister and his cabinet. Thus South Asian countries have experimented with diverse forms of governments, often adapting and modifying based on political circumstances of the day.

1.4.2.1 Political Parties

Political Parties in South Asia too have shown certain common characteristics and features in terms of their evolution and performance. In terms of their origin, several of the political parties have associated themselves with proto-nationalism, implying a nationalist identity or yearning before the state or the nation comes into existence. The Indian National Congress in India, Awami League in Bangladesh and the Ceylon National Congress, which later paved the way for United National Party in Sri Lanka, were all instances of such party evolution. As democratic deepening took place in the post colonial period, many of the countries saw a multiparty system, based on political ideology, identity and ethnicity. Pakistan's People's Party, Sri Lanka Freedom Party, Nepali Congress etc were formed, primarily on account of their disillusionment with the ruling party/dispensation and the apparent left-of-the-centre/socialist ideological thinking at least in their initial phases. The Bharatiya Janata Party, the leading political party in India today has been an offshoot of the erstwhile Bhartiya Jan Sangh and the Janata Party coalition, has focused on cultural nationalism like

the Bangladesh Nationalist Party with its right-of-the-centre, nationalist agenda. Alongside there are several political parties based on regional, sub-regional aspirations across the nations, making it truly a multiparty system.

1.4.3 Political Processes

Looking deeply into the working of political processes in South Asian countries, one sees a convergent pattern across most political parties. First, dynastic politics remains a recurrent feature in many political parties across South Asia. The Nehru -Gandhi family in India, the Bhutto-Sharif family in Pakistan, Kumaratunga-Rajapaksa family in Sri Lanka and the erstwhile Koirala family in Nepal are some examples of how many political parties in the region have been influenced by dynastic considerations. The name of the family is seen as instilling memories of struggle, liberation and sacrifice in the violent political history of the subcontinent and therefore a key poll plank. However, voters have also given due recognition to the performance of political parties at times and the dynastic plank has not succeeded. The other factor shaping party politics has been a growing trend in religion and identity based politics across South Asia, where polarization and targeting of individuals/communities based on their identity/opinion has seen an increase. Though South Asia was never immune to identity politics, as targeting of religious minorities, communal riots, politics of regionalism etc was always evident, there has been a growing institutionalization of the same in the recent years.

1.4.4 Intra-regional politics

The political dynamics as mentioned above though have been intrinsic to the individual countries, their implication for intra-regional politics too have been significantly evident. As mentioned earlier, identities based on ethnicity, language, religion percolate much beyond the borders which were mostly a colonial construction. Any of such identity conflict **within** a country has had the potential to spillover **outside** the country, particularly the neighbourhood. India has often become a common denominator in such conflicts, thereby affecting its foreign relations with the countries concerned. The genocide and refugee crisis in East Pakistan in 1971 and India's subsequent role in Bangladesh Liberation, the Sinhala-Tamil conflict in Sri Lanka and India's unsuccessful mediation efforts, Nepal's inner political turmoil during struggle against monarchy and question of Indian origin Madeshis, all have been issues where the regional ramifications of domestic politics in these countries have been visible and outcomes have not always been satisfactory. There has been a view that given such a scenario, India, rather than getting itself involved in the politics of the region, should instead focus on strengthening its linkages beyond the region. It is pertinent to mention at the same time that China's role in the region from a geopolitical context has increased all the more in the recent years, not always to the comfort of the countries concerned.

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer
ii) Check your answer with the answer given at the end of the Unit

Check Your Progress 1.

- 1) Which are the different forms of governments practiced in the South Asian region?

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- 2) Explain some of the major features of political parties in South Asia.

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1.5 SOUTH ASIA IN GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS

South Asia's location and position in the Asian geopolitical landscape has imparted it a unique space in global geopolitics which needs to be understood both from a historical as well as contemporary perspective. As mentioned earlier, the region was very much framed as a strategic construct imparting it a distinct role in the global geo-strategizing. While it retained that position during the Cold War years, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the more recent years marking uncertainty in global and regional geopolitics, its significance is becoming apparent.

1.5.1 South Asia during the Cold War years

While the early Cold War year rivalry between Soviet Union and the United States intersected the deep divide between India and Pakistan on almost similar lines during the later years it became more intensified and directly started shaping politics between the two countries. While India adopted a policy of Non Alignment from the 1960s, its ideological proximity was evident with the Soviet Union given its 1971 Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Security. Pakistan on the other hand, by joining the South East Asian Treaty Organization and Central Treaty Organization in the 1950s made its intentions clear. Despite the fact that both the countries became members of Non Aligned Movement (NAM) later, it did nothing to shift or alter their respective affinity to the two major powers. The fact that this dichotomy became all the more evident during the 1971 war showed that Cold war shadow in the subcontinent was likely to remain. It saw a further manifestation with the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (on which India did not take a public position) and Pakistan becoming a proxy in facilitating the American CIA support to the Afghan Mujahidin against the Soviets.

1.5.2 South Asia and the Global War on Terror

The other significant phase came in the 1990s, following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and a significant chunk of the terror infrastructure from Pakistan now being directed against India through cross border terrorism, which had already seen a rise since 1980s. South Asia came to be regarded as a global flashpoint after the two countries conducted nuclear tests in 1998, raising the specter of a nuclear confrontation between the two rivals. The 2001, 9/11 attacks in the United States further brought US back into the

picture as Pakistan again became a key ally, as a frontline state in the war on 'global terror'. While India Pak relations continued to deteriorate during the subsequent years, despite occasional signs of a potential thaw, the region failed to pick up on some good starts on cooperation initiatives that had been undertaken under the SAARC umbrella. The fact that radical Islamist groups further deepened in Pakistan, Bangladesh, apart from holding their ground in Afghanistan remained a matter of concern for India.

1.5.3 South Asia and China

China is another factor why importance of South Asia in regional and global geopolitics is likely to remain. Being in the immediate vicinity of South Asian neighbourhood, China's geographical presence can certainly not be denied. However, China has been gradually converting this into a geopolitical advantage by making it part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and initiating a number of big ticket infrastructure projects like Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, Gwadar port in Pakistan and Mongla port in Bangladesh in addition to the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and road and rail projects in Nepal are indications that it has already made a deep entry into South Asia, overcoming its geographical disadvantages vis a vis India. While on one hand India would continue with a limited engagement with China, it would at the same time contemplate using its presence in the Quadrilateral Dialogue framework, with US, Japan and Australia being part, to checkmate Chinese influence. Nevertheless, China's shadow over South Asian geopolitics, particularly given its cozy relationship with Pakistan cannot be ignored.

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer
ii) Check your answer with the answer given at the end of the Unit

Check your Progress 2

1. Examine how South Asia was impacted during Cold War years.
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2. Explain the present position of South Asia with reference to regional and global geopolitics
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1.6 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION IN SOUTH ASIA

South Asia is known to be a test case from economic development perspective, with the region facing enormous challenges of human development, reflecting on its poverty, education, health and therefore quality of life of majority of its people. Quality of human life is central to the overall economic wellbeing of a society, nation and the region and South Asia is no exception to this. At the same time, one sees within South

Asia, possibilities of economic growth and positive demographic dividend if the growth spread is even across regions and sectors. Unfortunately for South Asia the regional economic cooperation project too has faltered in its ability to gain any momentum whatsoever in addressing many of the economic problems and opportunities in a collective manner.

1.6.1 Human Development in South Asia

On the basis of their UN's Human Development Ranking among a total of around 190 countries, most of the countries stand at the lower quarter, including Nepal (142), Bangladesh (133), Bhutan (129), India (131), Pakistan (154), with the exception of Sri Lanka (72). Besides, the UNDP's multidimensional poverty index, MPI which looks at deprivations experienced by people at various levels including education, health and standard of living for 2021 for 109 countries points out that nearly half of the world's total poor, around 532 million, are from South Asia alone. These deprivations are known to get exacerbated across gender, ethnicity and caste. The fact that South Asia constitutes nearly one fourth of the world's total population makes the problem of multidimensional poverty all the more challenging, which needs concerted policy interventions. The situation is compounded by deep intra-regional inequalities and disparities that exist within the urban and rural areas at times.

1.6.2 Economic Growth in South Asia

While human development indicators in South Asia have generally shown a consistent state of concern, in the more recent years, the rate of economic growth has shown some positive indicators if looked at from a long term perspective. In the 1990s, when most of the South Asian economies opened up to a variety of economic reform initiatives, the rate of growth was around 5 percent across the region. In the years following 2000, just before the 2008 financial crisis, the rate of growth had reached a healthy 7 to 8 percent across the countries. This indicated that the structural change and productive workforce had combined together to create growth opportunities in South Asia which were earlier missing. It also led to a significant reduction in poverty across the region, though not its complete elimination. More recently too, as the global and regional economy comes to terms with post COVID situation, the World Bank has projected the region to grow by 7.1 percent in 2021-22, even though, it may remain fragile. The expectation is this growth will be led by digitization and service led sector. However this also underscores the need for systemic attention to the agricultural sector on which the bulk of population is still dependent, and the labour sector much of which still is in the unorganized sphere and has faced the maximum brunt during the pandemic crisis.

1.6.3 Regional Cooperation

In the midst of the above economic challenges and prospects, regional cooperation could have become a major instrument that ought to have carried the developmental story of South Asia in a collective, mutually beneficial framework with most of the countries facing similar problems. The region did make a good start with the creation of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 1985. The progress in the initial decades

was gradual yet focused with emphasis on areas like poverty alleviation, trade liberalization etc. SAARC countries also attempted forming common positions on fora like World Trade Organization on matters of agriculture, textiles and patents. Though political issues were to be kept out of deliberations, SAARC still managed with bits of political friction manifesting on SAARC platforms, but not derailing the entire process. However during the last five years, complete breakdown of communication between India and Pakistan has stalled the process to such an extent that questions are being raised about the viability of the SAARC process itself. Alternatives like bilateral approach or sub regional approach to regional cooperation are being suggested to circumvent the stasis that the regional grouping faces today. Moreover, India's growing inclination towards trans-regional partnerships rather than its immediate neighbourhood appears to be putting its 'neighbourhood first' policy on a back-foot. In the ideal sense of the term, both are coterminous with each other and a calibrated neighbourhood policy can create the basis for a more enlightened trans-regional policy and the two should not be seen as mutually exclusive.

Note:

- i. Use the space given below for your answer
- ii. Check your answer with the answer given at the end of the Unit

Check your Progress 3

- 1. Examine some of the major economic features of the South Asian subcontinent.

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- 2. Why has the pace of regional cooperation not picked up in South Asia?

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1.7 LETS SUM UP

South Asia is one of the most diverse yet congruent regions in the world based on its history, geography, culture and the nature of its political trajectory shaped by its post colonial evolution. The commonalities have seeped beyond political borders and in an ideal situation they ought to have become the basis for integrating the region. Moreover the region faces a lot of common challenges relating to population, poverty and deprivation which further makes the region the right candidate to be considered as part of a regional community. However the manner in which politics with and between the countries unfolded subsequent to the end of the colonial rule, the legacy of politics of religion, identity and ethnicity took precedence and politics deepened rather than contained the differences that erupted therein. The external geopolitics played out by Cold War players had no less role in

furthering these schisms that South Asia continues to face. One does see an opportunity emerging in the form of resilience of the South Asian economies and the ability of its people to withstand human and natural adversities. The onus shall lie on the governments in South Asia to keep these human sensitivities in mind in the making and implementation of these policies for a better South Asia.

1.8 REFERENCES

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1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check your progress 1

1. South Asia has experimented with various forms of government including Parliamentary, Presidential, Quasi Presidential, Monarchy and Constitutional Monarchy and each of these have adapted to the political circumstances that have existed at the time. For example, India has a bicameral Parliamentary system based on federal principles and Sri Lanka has a Presidential system with more Unitary features.
2. Political parties in South Asia have had some distinctive features such as proto nationalism, importance of dynastic politics, multi-party system based on ideological diversity and political mobilization based on ethnic, religious and cultural symbols. The outcome of these political contestations have been manifest not only within the countries, but have also had a transnational spillover as well. India has often been a common factor in such inter- state political conflicts.

Check your progress 2

1. During Cold War the rivalry between India and Pakistan parallely reflected the tensions between United States and Soviet Union respectively making the region a flash point for Cold War competition.

Besides the two countries used the super powers to accomplish their respective national interests.

2. In the contemporary context South Asia can be seen as domain where China and United States are seeking to gain foothold. China by extending its Belt and Road Initiative in South Asian countries and United States trying to contain it by making India part of the QUAD.

Check your progress 3

1. South Asia stands at a very critical phase of its human development with most of the countries lying in the bottom quarter of the Human Development Index. At the same time the region has been witness to a reasonably good rate of economic growth which has lasted the global financial crisis and the recent pandemic. A lot will therefore depend on the ability of policy makers to make best use of the opportunities provided by economic growth to improve human development. This can be done by adopting policies which provide equal opportunities and are inclusive. Otherwise growth will only be associated with greater inequalities.
2. Regional cooperation has not picked up in South Asia primarily because the two major countries India and Pakistan have not been able to reconcile their differences. As a result cooperation has not moved beyond some elementary steps, there by leading to alternative suggestions to the same. Given the uncertainty in global political economy, South Asia needs to come closer to each other to face emerging challenges collectively.

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