

Opinion

Finding South Asia

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When we talk of a country or even a region, first and foremost, geographical lines come to our mind. A country separated from another by some pillars or some lines is easier to visualise. It is because of this notion of separating one country from another that the wall of Berlin was erected and many other walls are still being erected. But such geographical and physical strategies are being weakened in the post-modern world of this century. Human thoughts and sentiments have proved to be stronger than iron gates. That is why the Berlin wall was to fall down. Obviously, previous wars were basically for the sake of a country's boarder lines. Still this notion cannot be overshadowed. But it does not have that strength, which it used to possess, to give way to the emergence of future conflicts shaped by human being's primordial loyalties to their ethnic groups. That is why countries are being divided and united on different bases. Geographical boundaries do not necessarily define a nation any more. And, similar is the case with the concept of a region.

South Asia, too, as a region should be taken on the same ground. It is not only the geographical location of the sub-continent, which comprises Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. South Asia, as such, is a distinct regional identity that the countries in general share. So, certain infra-structural linkages based on common history, race, religion, language and culture and a separate geographical location separated from West Asia by the massive Karakoram Himalayan range give an unique character to South Asia as different from the neighbouring West Asia and South East Asia, though some of the nations of the region share some features of the latter mentioned regions.

Colonial experience:

Almost all the South Asian states have experienced the impact of British colonialism. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka were fully under British rule at one time. Even a country like Nepal, though it apparently enjoyed political autonomy, was heavily dependent on the imperial power for its economic survival. Similar was the case with Bhutan and the Maldives. Because of a certain economic policy of the colonial power in the sub-continent, a peculiar situation developed in the area. No country could escape the network of the economy of the power. Thus all the countries of the region became a part of the colonialism, which gave it shared problems and shared economic characteristics.

Immigrants and cultural homogeneity:

Related to colonialism is the problem of immigration. The countries of the region were either colonies or under the influence of colonies. So, there was hardly any restriction on free movement

of people within the British Empire. Because of this, during the colonial era, a large number of Indian workers moved to the neighbouring Myanmar (then Burma) and Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) to serve in British owned industries and plantations. Later, most of the immigrants did not like to return to their homeland even after the collapse of the British Empire. However, these states did not agree to accept the people as their citizens and it became a kind of obstacle in the bilateral relations between the states. The case is similar with other states also. Nepalese immigrants to Burma, India or even Bhutan gave rise to same kinds of problems. The present problem of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal is, to some extent, an outcome of similar problem. Probably, due to this condition, the Tamils of India find it easier to side up with the Sri Lankan Tamil society in the same way as Pakistanis in Lahore find it easier to sympathize with the Punjabis in India.

Cultural, ethnic and linguistic phenomena have brought the citizens of different political spheres to a point of harmony, irrespective of their country. This is why most Nepalese in the Terai region feel their affinities with the Indians and Indians in Darjeeling, Kumaon and Gadwal feel so with Nepalese because of cultural and ethnic homogeneity. In the case of Bangladesh, Bhutan and even Maldives, they have same kind of linkage with states of the region. Thus, the issue of immigrants and cultural and ethnic homogeneity has been a shared concern of the South Asian states.

Religion:

Concerning religion, South Asia has been a unique sphere in the world. Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism have been the three dominating religions of the South Asian states. And, religious pluralism both at regional and national level is remarkable in this area. Even if it is so, the majority community in one state becomes a distinct minority in the neighbouring state and vice versa.

In Pakistan, Muslims are in majority, whereas in India Hindus are in majority. In Nepal, Hindus are vast majority, whereas Buddhists are in majority in Sri Lanka. Because of this, India and Nepal feel very much concerned about the plight of their fellow Hindus in other countries, i.e., Pakistan and Bangladesh. Similarly if there is a communal riot involving Muslims somewhere in India or even Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh show their concern. Likewise, Sinhalese cannot remain silent if there is any attack on the Buddhist minority in other countries. Thus, it can be viewed that religious stands in the South Asian countries have created a crucial cultural linkage cutting across the state boundaries in the region. This religious Panorama has given this region a different internal identity.

Language:

Language has been another basic factor that makes South Asia a region with an identity of its own. Most of the countries in this region are basically bilingual or multilingual. But it does not mean that this is its unique identity. Many European countries are, with no doubt, bilingual and multilingual. But the point is that there are a number of common languages in the region either spoken or understood by more than one South Asian States. In India, Nepali has been placed in the eighth schedule of the constitution as one of the regional languages. Likewise, Hindi is understood in a large part of this region. Sindhi is spoken both in India and Pakistan. Tamil speaking people are found in India, too. Punjabi is spoken both in India and Pakistan. In the case of Urdu, it is

understood not only by an individual race or nation. Thus, international boundaries do not necessarily coincide with the linguistic boundaries in these countries.

In this way, the South Asian states share an identical cultural experience as reflected in their social life, art, architecture etc. Because of a common history and belonging to one distinct geographical region of the world, these states can be taken to have given a common Eastern thought, or even a South Asian thought. So, South Asia hasn't been just a geographical boundary or location. It is a culture, language, and common experience of colonialism, religion and thought as well.

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