

In Search of a 'South Asian' Identity

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Voices from South Asia

“To talk of a monolithic South Asian community is bogus. What we have lived in, are interlocking communities. It is not a romanticisation of the past,” said psychologist Ashish Nandy.

“No! There is no such thing as a sense of a South Asian community” – the editor of the Indian Express, Shekhar Gupta, was emphatic.

“Do I feel South Asian? Do I feel Nepali? Where have we been able to develop a Nepalese community or a Bangladeshi community, let alone a South Asian community”, said Rishikesh Shaha, scholar-diplomat from Nepal.

“Once you go outside the region, you feel a definite sense of civilisational commonality as a South Asian”, said Deepak Gyawali an economist cum engineer.

“You have to have a better basis than the assumed Indian civilisational link on which to anchor a South Asian community. Because for the past 50 years these post-colonial states have been building their independent national identities on the basis of an “otherness”- Emphasis on a civilisational commonness carries with it the baggage of an imperial construct”, said Tapan Bose, film maker and human rights activist.

“Difficult for countries which do not see themselves as successful to come together and if (they do so) establish something to see it as something of value”, said Dinesh Mohan a Professor at IIT, Delhi.

“Distrust is what South Asian countries share and at the SAARC summit, they talk and eat and nothing else”, said Saleem Samad, Bangladeshi journalist.

Despite the mixed inflexion in the responses of the idea of a South Asian community, the dominant echo was a negative one, whether the interlocutor was an intellectual, a technocrat, a bureaucrat, a businessman, a politician, a feminist, an activist or a sports-person. Desirable, certainly, but did a sense of civilisational community exist? Was there a sense of a common destiny? Evidently, the publishers of the prestigious Cambridge encyclopedia for the region were also sceptical. The 1989 edition, on the cover, bears the title, “Cambridge Encyclopedia of India” and in smaller type, “Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka”. The title page inside carries in even smaller type, a third list of countries, “Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives.” The more obvious title surely was, “The Cambridge Encyclopedia of South Asia.” But it was rejected by the marketing department of the Cambridge

University Press. “Nobody’s heard of South Asia,” Rishikesh Shaha, Nepal’s former Foreign Minister was told.

Nearly a decade later, library shelves abound with titles as varied as “South Asian Vision and Perspective”, South Asian English”. “Islamic Contribution to South Asia’s Classical Music,” “A Field of One’s Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia” and “States Citizens and Outsiders: The Uprooted Peoples of South Asia”. Every year we see a fresh outcrop of regional NGOs like South Asia Human Rights Documentation Centre (SAHRDC) and South Asia Human Rights Forum (SAFHR) or Duryog Nivaran for disaster management, Eastern Himalayan Rivers Study Group, the Climate Action Network South Asia, South Asian Centre for Strategic Studies (SACSS) and the South Asian Journalists’ Association. There is a mushrooming of bilateral and multilateral dialogues within the region initiated by research institutes like the Centre for Policy Research as well as people’s initiatives like the Pakistan-India Forum for Peace and Democracy or the South Asian Observers’ Team for Elections. Then there is the emergence of the South Asian federation Games and people’s experiments like Travelling Film South Asia and the Ajoka South Asian Theatre Company.

The Siege Mentality

But with every breach of the barriers raised by the governing elite to keep apart the peoples of one of the poorest regions in the world, a backlash was waiting to happen. It is hardly likely that the ruling elite wants the emergence of cross-border networks, which might reorder the political agenda towards forging peoples’ security agenda.

The nation-building project of the post-colonial states of South Asia has been focused on walling in (or fencing off) the people in a confrontationist national security agenda. Can it be expected that the insecure ruling elite in all these countries have an interest in forging nationalist identities based on politics of exclusion? South Asia’s interlocking civilisational, ethnic, linguistic and economic ties are clearly seen as threatening because cross-border linkages which endorse and empower civil society, especially in fledging democracies, are regarded as subversive of centralising activity of the state.

Was it then just an aberration that the Bangladesh embassy in Kathmandu in July delayed and in effect denied visas to several Nepalis and a couple of Kathmandu-based Indians to attend a regional conference hosted by SAFHR in Bangladesh to discuss the situation of minorities in South Asia?

Nepal is often seen as having the potential to be the quintessential meeting ground for South Asians. Its open border with India could be, in theory, a possible model for a future South Asian community, with free flow of goods and capital as also people and publications. But with practically all South Asian governments facing major internal security threats accentuated by the failure of governance and the breakdown of institutions, there is a heightened sense of siege mentality. South Asian visitors increasingly complain of harassment at Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu. The Nepalese Home Ministry officials deny that they keep a special watch on the nationals of any particular country. But complaints are mounting.

Apparently, security measures have tightened at the request of the South Asian governments. At the top of the watch-list are visitors holding Sri Lankan passports. Nepal had been singled out as a lax transit point for LTTE activists. Consequently, a Tokyo-based Sri Lankan journalist of *Asiaweek* visiting Kathmandu, found herself being grilled by the immigration authorities and ordered to return to Bangkok from where she had set off, even though she had a ticket for Osaka. Bangladesh passport holders are also not immune. A Bangladesh businessman based in Dubai bound for Bangkok from Kathmandu was not allowed to board the flight. With Kathmandu allegedly becoming the transit point for ISI operations and RDX explosives, the Indian government is putting pressure on Nepal to adopt much more restrictive policies.

Within India, the heightening siege mentality has prompted moves to amend the Foreigner's Act. Taking a leaf out of Pakistan's statute books, punishment for infiltration could include the death penalty. The Shiva Sena-BJP state government in Maharashtra has been whipping up frenzy over the deportation of hundreds of alleged Bangladeshi migrants from Mumbai over the last couple of years. It should be added that counter-protests by opposition groups and the West Bengal-based alliance partner of the ruling BJP coalition, have stayed the deportation drive.

In Sri Lanka, on the eve of the tenth SAARC summit, the Foreign Office sent out advisories to their embassies that no visas were to be issued to visitors during the summit period, undermining efforts to host a parallel peoples' SAARC forum. Indeed, the Colombo summit could have been held on the high seas; so minimal was the involvement of the people or the South Asian media. All discussion on the destabilising implication for the region of a nuclear South Asia was declared off limits. As the Sri Lankan Foreign Minister said, "it is a bilateral matter". As if a "Nuclear South Asia" had no implications for the security or survival of the region. The issue of Bhutanese refugees, "economic migrants", and any other contentious issue were also kept off the agenda. They concentrated, instead on non-contentious issues. They discussed a proposed Convention against child trafficking, promotion of cultural exchanges and developing a collective South Asian position on WTO and bio-resources.

Bilateral versus Regionalism

At Colombo, clearly, bilateralism was privileged over any ceremonial regional speak. The bilateral exchange between India and Pakistan was pathetic displays of no-sense speak. One would have thought that the civilisational community of India and Pakistan should have enabled them to use words and a body language, which held the same meaning for each other. Instead, all we have had since Colombo is explanation upon contradictory explanation of what their words meant or did not mean. So we have the Pakistan High Commissioner in Delhi, ingenuously explaining that Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, didn't mean that it was a "waste of time" to meet the Indian Prime Minister, A.B. Vajpayee, but that it would be a waste of time to resume the dialogue unless there was first agreement on how to conduct the dialogue.

The nuclear tests have resulted in a virtual breakdown of the official Indo-Pakistan dialogue because of the hesitant moves by the governments to walk that extra mile for regional co-operation. The widening fault-line of the Indo-Pakistan conflict sucks in the whole region.

But what is heartening is the spontaneous upsurge of anti-nuclear protests by thousands of citizens in both countries. In response to Shiv Vishwanath's recent anti-nuclear article "Patriot Games" in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, the social anthropologist received more than 30 letters from Pakistan. When he was in Karachi, he was asked whether he would take across a letter. It soon became a trunk full of letters, including a telegram to be sent to someone's niece who was getting engaged in Bihar. "If they have already crossed the boundaries in their head why should crossing boundaries be a problem, Shiv Vishwanath observed. Already there are these scattered experiments in criss-crossing of national state boundaries, which hold the promise of seeding "nested communities". Vishwanath, believes that if we would only allow for "nested communities" to start we would move towards a community very fast. "Take the case of Gorkha battalion. It represents a very specialized notion of a South Asian community. Expand it", he added. Experiments like allowing the study of Nepali history in Bihar and U.P. or Sri Lankan history in Tamil Nadu will open up once again the possibilities of multiple identities and varies communities, "Sri Lanka would then not be seen as a problem state reduced to a single quotient: the LTTE. After all you can be a Tamil poet from Sri Lanka, from Malaysia or actually from Tamil Nadu", he said.

The possibilities opened up by the resurgence of intra-state regionalism, that is, within nation-states, could also be conducive to promoting regionalism among nation states. It would help to counter the misgivings of the smaller states vis-à-vis a hegemonic India. Political scientist, Rajni Kothari, argued that, "once there is great federalism, greater democratization through regionalism within the country, it may be more amenable to regionalism outside. The challenge to a monolithic hegemonic India in the region must come from within, i.e. the democratization of the state structure, the breakdown into regions". In the International Relations discourse, regionalism has had to carry the imperialist baggage of US backed regional influentials, that is using a regional framework to dominate neighbours. For Kothari, a future South Asian civilizational community has to find a confederal structure. "Part of the confederation would be within India", he said.

But before that as the problems of governance become more acute and as institutions like the judiciary, the universities and civil society as a whole comes under pressure, it can only reinforce centralising authoritarian tendencies in these states. In South Asia, the Bharatiya Janta Party led government is watched with considerable anxiety; especially the implications for the region of the agenda of the RSS. It is not forgotten that a "nuclear India" was an integral part of the RSS agenda.

Ashish Nandy, accepts that increasingly insecure and paranoid governments will be on the look out for external enemies. But there will be other countervailing forces at play. "The more they project an official version of history, the more they put out what we should believe and what we should not, the more the younger generation will want to look at the other side of the picture. Those who are building up this monolithic 'other' (enemy) are the very people that the Indian public doesn't trust very much. The whole political class is getting discredited in all the countries of the region", Nandy said.

It is a dangerous portent for the future of democratic politics in the region. Nandy, in fact, even pins his hope on "dissent of the couch potato" whose attention span will gulp down the euphoria unleashed by the nuclear test and then want to move on. The reaction to the India Pakistan Nuclear tests was in a sense an acid test. Nandy recalled that in the first week, Star TV showed a support of

90 per cent and within three weeks it was down to 60 per cent. In the middle of 1997 when CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies) had done a survey, support for the bomb was assessed to be about 36 per cent. My personal guess is that it is still about that 36 per cent," he said.

For every act of fencing in by the state authorities, there have to be hundreds of secessionist impulses, as it were, made up of cross-cutting vested interests. The textured weave of vested interests will grow through "every day political change" rather than any grand socio-political engineering design, argues Nandy. It is made up of the fact that a Nepali businessman, a staunch nationalist, looks to India as his main market or to Bangladesh for the export of turnip seeds. The writings of an ardent Bangladeshi nationalist are more admired in West Bengal than in Bangladesh. Boundary crossing is inherent in our cultures, once you recognise the linguistic possibilities". The technology of e-mail, faxes and the internet invite the crossing of boundaries. Anarchy and the latest technology go together.

Crossing the boundaries through the Web

South Asian Journalists Association could get a new lease of life through its website – SAJA.ORG. However, the first volley, a fortnight after the May 11 nuclear test, was fusillade of exchanges which turned the website into a battlefield for the Fourth Indo-Pak war. Expletives have been so explosive, that there are few printable entries like "Pakistan Zindabad – Indians eat my socks". Some surfers have tried to appeal to sanity, deploring the tendency of some people across the border to respond to nuclear bombs with the same sentiment with which they respond to Indo-Pak cricket matches. "Driven by an overdose of atomic testosterone, his kind thinks that it takes balls to play either", a Surfer writes in.

It is the e-mail from the children, which shows the way forward on how to build a South Asian future. One is from a Sindhi girl born in Canada, who grew up in Poona, who writes, "The only information I have about a country called Pakistan is tales told to me by a Press blinded by political motives. The only emotion I feel for this country is the emotion I hear in the voice of my grandmother. She speaks to me about the splendour of her mother's home in Karachi, Sindh... I have never seen this place. I am an Indian. I speak fluent Marathi... Last summer, I spent in London. Here I met another Sindhi girl. We chatted a while over clothes and boys... We look the same, think the same. She loves to watch Hindi films too... Ah! So she's the one my curses reach when I watch that cricket match. May be she's the one who will cry should "my India" choose to blow up some part of her world. She doesn't look evil to me... I like my so-called enemy. How did we become enemies anyway? When was it decided I wasn't to be allowed to like her..."

Sporting Links

Down the technology ladder, a more traditional channel for crossing boundaries are sporting links. Cricket and hockey matches have created sports stars, which South Asians have made their own. Mohammed Azharuddin, Wasim Akram and Sannat Jayasurya are identified as South Asian players. Leander Peas is much more than an Indian tennis star. Hockey superstars Shahbaz Ahmed and Pargat Singh are celebrities across border. Stand an Indian, a Pakistani or a Sri Lankan team against Australia or England, and you will get all the people of South Asia rooting for the home (regional) team. There is also the SAARC cricket cup.

None of the South Asian country teams can hope to play in the Soccer World Cup but the South Asian Federation (SAF) games gives them a chance to play and improve. V. Krishnaswamy, sports editor for the *Indian Express*, tracking the history of the 14 years old biennial SAF games emphasised the importance they had acquired in the sporting calendar for South Asia. It is also the only forum in which such unique South Asian games as “kabbadi” are played. But whether the SAF games have inculcated a South Asian sports *esprit de corps*, Krishnaswamy was doubtful. Come the Asian games or the Commonwealth games and there is no distinct South Asian sports caucus.

The issue of Water-Sharing

In the end, it is ground level practicalities like the management of water resources in an integrated Eastern Himalayas river system, which have pushed cooperation among Nepal, Bangladesh and India. Deepak Gyawali of Nepal’s Water Conservation Foundation, the current chair of Duryog Nivaran, explained how a non-official South Asian initiative on disaster mitigation grew out of the work that they were doing in their own countries. Sri Lanka’s Intermediate Technology Foundation, took the initiative and one by one Bangladesh Disaster Forum, India’s Disaster Mitigation Forum and others came on board to form a network. During the campaign against the Arun III dam in Nepal, the Supreme Court upheld the right to information in any matter of public interest. That was picked up by South Asian activists fighting their own battles for sustainable development, Gyawali said.

NGOs Reinforcing the Common Chord

Professionals attending the IIT Delhi run annual conference on injury Prevention and Safety Promotion, find that the South Asians gravitate towards each other. According to Professor, Dinesh Mohan, who for the past seven years has been running the course, finds that the participants from the region group together. “They think they share similar problems. And even tend to gang up against people from other countries”, he observed. But the colonial hangover still made them look to the West for the last word. “We still made them look to the West for the last word. “We still look to the West for expertise, but face it; it is also because we don’t have the expertise. Our scientific institutions, our universities are decaying. We’ve lost the lead we once had. There is a crisis of confidence. It is difficult for countries, who do not see themselves as successful, to come together or if they do, to establish something to see it of value”. Mohan said.

But more and more NGOs, in South Asia are beginning to come together to form regional networks to tackle issues like mass movement of refugees and cross-border migration which can not be tackled at a single country level. It was in 1994 at the International Human Rights Conference in Vienna, that for the first time, a South Asian Human Rights community acquired a profile. While the official delegations of India and Pakistan were slugging it over the Kashmir, Indians and Pakistanis from autonomous human rights organisation within their countries, were discovering that they could work together on what were common concerns, discrimination against minorities, women’s rights, impunity provisions in the law, torture and extra judicial killings. You cannot build a peace movement in India without worrying about what is happening in Pakistan or

Sri Lanka. In many of the more nascent democracies in the region, assertion of the civil society is just taking off. And cross border networks help to empower these initiatives.

South Asian Identity: Forged not Spontaneous!

In the end it is the “work” which pushed South Asians together. Feminist economist, Binal Aggarwal, found that in the mapping of gender and land rights, cultural commonalities overlapped and defined a boarder framework of analysis. Her pionerring work, *A Field of one’s Own: Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, shows the existence of these strong commonalities as in the case of South India and Sri Lanka. But Aggarwal was more ambivalent about whether as regards the women’s movement and the feminist network; there was a lived sense of a South Asian community. She may have been called upon to lecture on land lights in Kathmandu University but that was more an outgrowth on various women’s networks and not the reflection of an existing sense of South Asian women’s community. Aggarwal, makes a distinction between the many conscious initiatives within the women’s movement to build a South Asian consciousness and the organic existence of a South Asian community.

What is at play here seems to be the conscious forging of a South Asian identity rather than a spontaneous outgrowth from a sense of civilisational community or communities, rooted in the collective memory of a history and culture shared by the peoples of the region, now divided into seven nation states. Also, there is an implicit recognition that the building of a vision or visions of a common South Asian destiny has to be anchored in multiple networks of non-official groups interacting across borders to tackle common concerns of poverty, illiteracy, environment, human rights and governance.

Of course, there are State-initiated efforts to come together, driven by the pressure of a globalising economy to exercise trans-regional leverage. South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) fits into this needs to form an economic bloc. But bureaucratised regional frameworks like SAARC privilege national identity above a regional, ethnic linguistic or a feminist, environmentalist or human rights activist identity. As Tapan Bose, the Secretary General of SAFHR, on his return from the parallel Peoples’ SAARC Forum in Colombo said: “I don’t believe it is the agenda of states to promote a regional identity. It is to promote their own identity. At the Colombo summit, I saw a gathering where everyone had gone to make sure that their national positions were not compromised whether it was the nuclear issue or refugees”.

The SAARC system brings together Indians as Indians, Bangladeshis as Bangladeshis, and Nepalis as Nepalis who zealously defend not only their turf but identity. It privileges a nationalist identity against a regional, an ethnic or even a feminist identity. The geo-political dynamics of the South Asian region is structured around the colossus of India. It is not only that the other states are contiguous with India and linked through India, but that the sense of history and culture in each of them is defined in relation to India. It is further complicated by the fact that the self-image of the Indian elite as the successor state of Imperial British India has bred a “big brotherly” attitude deeply resented by the other sates.

The result has been that the past fifty years have been marked by “Un-neighbourly” relations with every state feeling mutually threatened by the other. It is not incidental that it has taken more than

40 years for India to grant transit rights to Nepal to use the Chittagong post in Bangladesh. How many more years will it take for people of the Indian states of Mizoram and Tripura to be able to transit through Bangladesh to reach mainland India? However, it is important to add that the recent inauguration of the Banga-bandhu bridge in Bangladesh has opened up the possibility of driving from Dhaka to Biratnagar in a day.

After more than twelve years, the institutional profile of SAARC remains sterile. The SAARC process is choked up by treaty congestion. Commitments are rushed through in enthusiastic ballast of rhetoric at ceremonial summits and ministerial conferences, to be promptly ignored as soon as the delegation is back on the national *terra firma*.

The Constraints

The possibilities of developing trade and regional economic co-operation is the cornerstone of SAARC. South Asia Preferential Trade Arrangement took ten halting years in the making to be negotiated successfully. But that did not discourage the Nepalese delegation at the Ninth Male summit to propose telescoping the plans for the South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA) from 2005 to 2002. The officials were incredulous; but at the Male retreat not only did Nepal carry the day but the leaders came up one year better – SAFTA by the year 2001. Many experts say that it has exposed how ridiculous such a target was. The Colombo summit has decided, to ready the text of a regulatory framework of SAFTA, by the year 2001.

At Colombo, much was made about India unilaterally removing quantitative restrictions on 2000 items for trade, a long-standing demand of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. What was forgotten was that Indian businessmen have been arguing that it would make little difference to the Indian economy if it made the grand gesture of dropping all tariff barriers on trade within the region. The Indian Foreign Secretary projects India as a stabilising element in the region; its size he says, is an advantage. Its gravitational pull could act as a catalyst for regional co-operation to take off. But you have only to shift the focus from New Delhi to Kathmandu or Dhaka for a very different perspective.

There is a problem on the trade-payment front too. Except for India and Nepal, the currency of the countries of the region has no value for each other. There is no country to country currency exchange rate. No bank will exchange the currency. It is as if there is no trade, no demand for each other's currency. Currencies have to be converted into dollars and then back again to effect payment.

All the excitement about the Mahakali treaty as presaging the joint harnessing of the Himalayan river systems collapses in the face of the harsh reality of political opposition in Nepal. It is a legacy of past unequal treaties and India's big brotherly attitude. The dream of the natural gas resources of Bangladesh piped to the Indian market, transforming the South Asian east, seems to have been a victim of the competitive politics of the Begums in Bangladesh has ensured that anti-Indianness will be the defining political motif of Bangladesh politics, fanned by such perceived inequities as the Farakka dam. The hopes raised for a new co-operative turn in the relationship with Pakistan heralded by the idea of Pakistan selling power to India are stillborn. After the nuclear tests have locked the two in more jingoistic postures, can it be expected that Pakistan will extend even Most

Favoured Nation (MFN) treatment to India? There is a market, there are complementarities. But no sooner had Indian tyre manufacturers rushed to Pakistan when it opened up its market early this year, than its then Finance Minister, Sartaj Aziz, put up the barriers. No trade without resolving political issues – read, Kashmir.

SAARC: A Talking Shop

SAARC is a talking shop. Nowhere is there more hot air than in the pious exhortations to promote people to people contacts. In the Colombo declaration, the “heads of states or governments stressed that more convenient travel connections between the SAARC countries were essential to facilitate fruitful interaction among peoples in the region, in particular, among the professional groups, creative artists, pilgrims and journalists.”

But what does it amount to? A big question mark hangs over every non-official regional meeting of professionals. Will they or will the participants from the region get visas?

In April 1998, the SAARC Information Ministers endorsed an 18-point plan to promote free flow of information. At the top of the list is “free flow of newspapers, periodicals, books and other publications”. Are the governments of India and Pakistan interested in letting their citizens read each other’s newspapers or books? Apparently not, if the difficulty Indians and Pakistanis have in getting each other’s newspapers and books is anything to go by. Till 1988, access to each other’s books had to be routed via Singapore. Although the 1988 Protocol, which opened up the book trade, has lapsed, by default, there is now open trade. But it is more in theory than in practice, as the Indian Book Fair, last February, highlighted. Books bearing titles, which have anything to do with partition, Kashmir or the History of Independence was blocked. Scholars researching Indo-Pakistan relations in their home countries have very little access to each other’s works. In Bangladesh too there is resistance to the opening up of the market; but it is more out of fear of being swamped by India’s much larger publishing industry and active piracy tradition.

Conclusion

After fifty years, and three generations, who have learnt to live walled in, it seems we have lost the possibilities of multi-faceted identities and the memories of interlocking communities. In India, we have stamped out the notion of “Hindu pani” and “Muslim pani”. Now, there is much less hesitation in eating together and professionally interacting. We no longer dress differently; we go to the same schools and colleges. But we no longer know each other, said Syeda Hamid Sadiyan, Member, National Commission for Women. “Time there was when during Moharram, the period of mourning for the martyrdom of the prophet’s grandson, the Hindus in the neighbourhood would sympathise with us in our mourning, raining down petals on the tazias. Today, it is not unusual for a friend to ring up and wish me on Moharram as if it was Id festival or Diwali,” she said.

The lived memory of community has gone but the forging of a common political destiny is a long way off. It is a sad commentary that the initiative to forge a South Asian community or communities comes from the children of the South Asian elite who meet abroad. Once outside the region, we do feel South Asian. It was not incidental that 90 per cent of the people who signed the “South Asians Against Nukes” appeal, were South Asians abroad. How do we pull in the smaller

histories of interlocked communities, the little traditions and use them to build a future of a common destiny for South Asia?