

Study Material for
Semester - VI

Paper : DSE → Understanding
South Asia

Unit : 3 → State System/
Regional System
in South Asia -

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Regional System in South Asia

South Asia comprises seven countries—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives. According to some writers, it includes Afghanistan also, though Afghanistan is as much a part of South Asia as of West Asia. South Asia forms a distinct geographical entity. Geographically, South Asia is a contiguous land mass without any natural frontiers except for narrow water corridors between India on the one hand and Maldives and Lanka on other hand. It is bounded by the Himalayan mountains on the north, by the Indian Ocean and its offshoots—the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian sea—on the south, and by mountains and jungles on the east. Only in the north-west, where Afghanistan stands astride the junction of South Asia, West Asia and Central Asia, do the external geographic and political frontiers fail to coincide.¹ Thus South Asia's well defined external boundaries provide one of the pre-requisites for regional cohesion. In contrast with South Asia's external boundaries, the political geography within the region follows no neat pattern. The three most important river systems—the Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra—cut across the boundaries of the principal countries in a way that has exacerbated the disputes between them. Most of the internal political boundaries of the area have been determined by ancient animosities between religious or ethnic communities and by the history of the pre-independence period. The boundaries between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh roughly follow the lines between Hindu and Muslim majority areas. Nepal and Bhutan remained independent nations, because British India never tried to absorb them. Afghanistan retained its independence largely because it served British and Russian interests that it remained a buffer state. The border imposed by the British still stands as the boundary between Afghanistan and Pakistan but it bisects the territory of important Pushtun tribes in such a way as to cause continued disputes between the two

countries.

Historically, the countries of the region have experienced similar, if not identical, processes of historical evolution. For instance, colonialism that gripped India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives did not leave Nepal and Bhutan untouched by the implications of the colonial rule, though they remained formally unannexed. The South Asian nations not only share a common history, they also belong to a common civilisational pattern. Even the ethno-religious groups of the region have cross national characteristics. The members of the region have several commonalities—cultural heritage, similar social habits and climatic conditions as well as economic complementarities. Thus, South Asia is a distinct civilisational entity, bound together by shared languages, religions, culture, ethnicity, historical memories and developmental predicament.

Economically, notwithstanding differences in the levels of poverty and deprivation, the whole of South Asia is under-developed. In fact, South Asia is one of the poorest, most densely populated, most illiterate parts of the globe. Over a billion people (20 per cent of the global population) live here, occupying only 4 per cent of the land surface. Its share in world's GNP is just a little over 2 per cent. Its export share is just 0.8 per cent of world's export and its share in import is just 1.3 per cent. It contributes hardly one per cent of the total world's trade. Its total foreign exchange reserve amounts to just .7 per cent of global reserves. Yet, because of internal animosities, South Asia is one of the world's most militarised region.

THE REGIONAL SYSTEM

A regional system normally comprises four kinds of actors—hegemon, bargainer, peripheral-dependents and external challengers. The South Asian regional system revolves around India as a dominant power, Pakistan as bargainer and others as peripheral-dependents.

CORE MEMBERS OF THE REGION

India: Between 1947 and 1971 India and Pakistan were the two core members of the system, but the bifurcation of Pakistan in December 1971 added Bangladesh as a third core member. But the disparity between India and other states is striking. India accounts as much as 77 per cent of South Asian population, three-fourths of its land area, generating 78 per cent of its GNP and two-thirds of its defence potential and 60 per cent

of its global trade and 70 per cent of its industrial output. India's pre-eminent position in terms of areas, population and military strength in the region has been further reinforced after the emergence of Bangladesh at whose birth India played the role of mid-wifery. India's superiority was still further enhanced by its explosion of a nuclear device (1974) and launching of satellites and missiles (both short and medium range). Pakistan's reaction to India's nuclear explosion was one of apprehension and dismay. No wonder, both are on the verge of gatecrashing the nuclear club or pose as near nuclear rivals.

India is the only country in the region that has common land or maritime borders with all of them, whereas none others share the border with any other state of the region. Further, India is the only country whose interests impinge directly on all others. Both geography and history combine to give India natural preponderance. A certain dissonance between India and its neighbours is thus built into the situation and India cannot help it. The paranoia of small nations existing uneasily with a big nation is familiar. History shows that large nations are condemned to live in uneasiness with small neighbours. Metaphorically speaking, it is the dread of doe obliged to share a habitat with an elephant. After all, no big country can hope to win a popularity contest. No wonder, there is not a single nation in the neighbourhood with which India has a tension-free relations except Maldives.

Pakistan: Pakistan is the next important core member of the region. Though both Pakistan and India have a great deal in common—their background and history, linguistic, cultural and ethnic affinities and twin ceasarian birth, and both have inherited similar political institutions from the British, their paths diverged soon after their birth. While India is one of the few Asian or African countries that has demonstrated a unique record of political stability—holding of regular general elections peaceful succession of leadership and adopting of some important socio-economic reforms, Pakistan's record in comparison is palpably poor. She has failed to construct a sound political system. Her attempt to operate a parliamentary system has almost floundered so far. While India is a secular democracy, Pakistan is an Islamic state. Further, Pakistan has developed strong emotional links with other Muslim states of the Middle-East, specially after the birth of the Bangladesh, and now its is trying for the same with Central Asia. She is already a member of the Regional Cooperation and Development (formed in 1965) along with Iran and Turkey. The RCD was, however, changed into an economic out-fit known as Economic Cooperation Organisation in 1985, and now includes Afghanistan,

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Azerbaijan and five other Central Asian states. Yet, she has only modest success in turning religious ties into political and economic bonds.

The political and military relations established with outside powers by South Asian countries have been shifting and complex. India initially hoped to limit external involvement in South Asia but Pakistan's security perception was different. Pakistan has always been of the view that it could hope to gain security against a neighbour four times its size, if it secured support from outside the subcontinent. Subsequently, India's military action in 1971, assisting the development of an independent Bangladesh, was taken as a positive proof of Delhi's diabolical designs by Pakistan. Pakistan's alliance with the USA (since 1954) aroused great resentment in India and compelled her to move to the Soviet Union and to China (until 1960). After the 1962 Sino-Indian war both the super powers at odds with China gave arms to India until the 1965 Indo-Pak war.

Bangladesh: A product of a double partition, Bangladesh is the third core country of the region. The foreign policy of Bangladesh reflects its preoccupation with the struggle for survival. It is derisively nicknamed the 'ghetto of Asia'. It is also known as international 'bread basket', and lately the basket has become bottomless. Further the country is singularly unlucky in facing intermittent natural calamities. Being poorest in the region in has little choice but to beg and accept help from all quarters. It wants to keep correct relations with India, China, the US and the (former) Soviet Union.

Its friendly period with India ended with the murder of Sheikh Mujib in August 1975 and remained so irrespective of change of regimes in Bangladesh—Zia-ul-Rehman (1977-81), H.M. Ershad (1982-91) and Begum Khalida Zia (1991). Apart from the Ganges water disputes, a fresh controversy has been currently contrived to counter the claim of India over the island of New Moore (Talpatti), which lies in the Indian territorial waters and the Chakma refugees.

Real politick has guided the foreign policies of these countries although often masked in moral terms. Yet, ideology has little impact on the ties created and abandoned over the years. India's close relations with the former Soviet Union has been a corner-stone of her foreign policy. The same is almost true of Pakistan's link to the USA and China (since 1963).

PERIPHERAL MEMBERS

The other countries of South Asia are of much less significance as they

lack the strength to influence decisively the trend of events. Their political systems range from parliamentary democracy of Sri Lanka, (switched over to presidential form of government since 1978) to the monarchic authoritarian governments in the Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal and Bhutan. Afghanistan which had long been a traditional monarchy is now a Republic since 1973, when Daoud Khan overthrew the monarchy. Presently, the country is in the throes of a political crisis. With the exception of Sri Lanka all these countries are at the periphery of South Asia in terms of geography as well as power. They share few common characteristics and their relations with one another are generally minimal. A central issue of these countries is how to relate their larger South Asian neighbours. Bhutan has little choice but to accommodate India. Sri Lanka and Nepal have generally tried to adopt a neutral stance or equidistance postures in Sino-Indian and Indo-Pak disputes, a course not palatable to India. Afghanistan has often pursued a policy of confrontation with Pakistan. Just as a shared Islamic faith was not strong enough bond to hold Pakistan together, it has not been sufficient to overcome the antagonism that has characterised Afghan-Pak relations during the last four decades. Their dispute has centred on the Afghan demand that the Pushtu speaking people of the North West Frontier Province in Pakistan be given the right to establish an independent Pushtunistan. Afghanistan, itself a conglomerate of diverse tribal groups, has been ruled by Pushtuns living on the Afghan side of the Durand Line—a line which Kabul had claimed as invalid on the ground that the British imposed it by force in the late 19th century. Pakistan's unwillingness to acknowledge any valid Afghan interest east of the Durand Line led Kabul to conduct propaganda campaign against Pakistan and to provide subsidies to tribal leaders. Pakistan has closed the border periodically, and Afghanistan has turned to the Soviet Union for transit rights, economic assistance and arms.² More recently, as a counter weight to the Soviets, President Daoud had given India and Iran more attention. His government resurrected the issue which lay dormant from 1963 to 1973. Daoud, however, was overthrown in the April 1978 coup, and Afghanistan was placed under a Marxist party rule backed by the Soviet Union until 1992, which Pakistan never recognised. But in the post-Najib period, Pakistan has acquired great leverage in Afghanistan through its protege, Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, the present Prime Minister in Afghanistan.

Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka (Emerald Island) covers an area of 65,610 sq. kms. and has a population of 18 million. Lanka is hardly 30 miles away from the Southern tip of India. According to A.L. Basham, "Lanka is

continuation of India." Indian ties with Lanka are of the deepest sort, involving history, religion, language and commerce. Historically, culturally and ethnically, Lanka has closest relations with the main land (India). Lanka is mosaic of ethnic, religious and social groups in which Sinhalese Buddhists are in majority. Inter-group tension is a perennial feature of Lanka.

Sri Lanka's relations with India have been uneasy at times but never very unfriendly. Though sharing many commonalities, their bilateral relations have been characterised by strains and stress during the last three decades. The major problem between India and Lanka concerned the status of Indian Tamils who constitute 5.6 per cent of the total population. India agreed in 1964 to accept repatriation of 5,25,000 of them but the implementation of the Agreement had been slow until a fresh agreement (1974) by which both agreed to share equally 50,000 of Indian Tamils. Besides Indian Tamils, there are 12.6 per cent Lankan Tamils who mostly live in north eastern (Jaffna) part of Lanka. What divides the Sinhalese and the Tamils is mainly language and religion. Sick of discriminatory treatment in matters of religion and language some of the Lankan Tamils led by LTTE have been fighting a war of liberation since 1983. They are demanding recognition of a distinct nationality with the right of self-determination. Since across the narrow stretch of salt water live no fewer than 50 million people with ties of blood and kinship (Tamil Nadu), "India could not be treated just another country and unconcerned," as Indira Gandhi had said. For the last ten years Lanka has been living an uncertain and tense existence. Ethnic violence has been tearing it apart. Even the despatch of IPKF under the Indo-Lankan, Accord of 1987 could not resolve it, and had to be withdrawn by March 1990.

Sri Lanka's economic and cultural links with the West are most extensive. In recent years, it has moved closer to China and the USA in world politics. All in all, pride and pique rather a real conflict of interests have been responsible for occasional tension in Indo-Lanka relations.

Nepal: No two countries are so closely tied with geography, culture, history and even economy as Nepal and India. Geographically, Nepal is an extension of India. Its low-land areas are part of the Ganges plain and it occupies the central part of the Himalayan foothills and mountains that extend for nearly 3,000 miles between China and the subcontinent. Both India and Nepal have open border of 1,700 kms. Nepal's religious and cultural affinities with Indian society are very strong. About 25 per cent of its population consists of Indian migrants. Its economic links with

Indian are overwhelming in terms of trade. Nepal is the highest recipient of Indian aid. Besides, she is dependent on India for transit rights to outside world.

Nepal is strategically essential to India. In 1950, India negotiated a treaty with Nepal which provided for consultation if either should face an external threat. The treaty binds them in common defence framework. However, since India's defeat by China (1962) Nepal has devoted considerable efforts to reduce its ties with India in terms of political and military relations. Lately, its international contacts have been broadened and it has accepted aid from several quarters. Now the USA and China are its principal donors apart from India. Recently a road from the Tibetan border to Kathmandu was built by China's aid. In 1970, Nepal insisted that it no longer needed an Indian Army Mission to train its army or India troops to check posts on its northern border. After India's role in Bangladesh and outright annexation of Sikkim (1974) there is a legitimate fear of India's intentions. No wonder, since 1975 Nepal has been pressing India to recognise her status as a zone of peace.

Squeezed between two regional giants, Nepal would always have to walk on the razor's edge. Very recently, Nepal acquired 400 trucks of sophisticated arms from China, including anti-aircraft missiles. Since India behaved like a jealous husband, any symptom of coquetry and flirtation with China on the part of Nepal creates problem between India and Nepal. In fact, Nepal suffers from David and Goliath Syndrome. In 1962, King Mahendra had remarked; "This country cannot be a calf standing between two fighting bulls." Some of the irritants between India and Nepal are—unequal Treaty of 1950, trade imbalances, transit rights, water resources, 'zone of peace' demand and ethnic question. Nevertheless, because of geographical proximity, cultural stratum of the people and economic dependence, both are condemned to have special relationship, and India will continue to enjoy a great leverage in Nepal.

Butan: Nestled in the high Himalayas and girded by China and India, Bhutan is largely inaccessible to the rest of the world. A kingdom in the sky, it is the most closed country by its geography and conservative monarchy. Bhutan also lies within India's strategic defence perimeter along the Himalayas. It is located in the northern flank of the narrow strip of Indian territory through which New Delhi maintains communications with its north eastern areas. Bhutan is guided in its foreign relations by New Delhi under the Treaty of 1949, and has little choice but to work closely with India in view of its dependence on India for trade and transit rights, as, like Nepal, it is also land locked. Bhutan whose people have

ethnic and religious links with Tibet, moved closer to India because of fear of China after the rape of Tibet (1950) and after the Sino-Indian war of 1962. But India recognises Bhutan's status as independent state and even sponsored its claim to UN membership in 1971 as a safeguard of her independence.

Maldives: Maldives is a tiny island situated near Sri Lanka and has a population of 2 lakhs. In 1798, it came under the British rule. It got independence in 1959, and became a Republic in 1968. For a long time Abdul Qayum has been its president. Maldives is the only country in which India had never any problem. It was India who saved the Qayum's regime in 1988 from a pocket coup by sending small force to the island. As a member of SAARC, Maldives hosted the fifth summit of SAARC at Male in 1990.

INTRUSIVE MEMBERS OF THE REGION

South Asia has been at the cross-roads of interaction among the three largest military powers of the world—the US, the Soviet Union and China. Yet, despite the continuous interests displayed by them, South Asia was not on their priorities in terms of their vital interests. The region was drawn into world politics because of mutual animosities between India and Pakistan since independence and between Pakistan and Afghanistan in the eighties. "Just as South Asia's internal quarrels and the desire for economic growth and modernisation led the country of the area to look for external support, its location as the only part of non-communist world bordering both the Soviet Union and China made it of great interests to the major powers during the cold war days. In short, its geographic location, internal disputes and external links led to continuous Soviet, Chinese and American efforts to influence events in the region."³

The political systems of the principal external powers involved in South Asian affairs ranged from the revolutionary Marxism (Maoism) of China through 'mature' Marxism of the Soviet Union to the capitalist democracy of the United States. The differences in their political systems and ideologies have been secondary to consideration of real politik in determining their relationships with the various countries of the region. For instance, Moscow initially supported India largely to disrupt the Western policy of containment, and more recently has done so to counter China. As long as Sino-Soviet relations remained hostile, Moscow needed close links with New Delhi in order to participate effectively in

any balance of power in the region. Moscow, just like Washington, had few problems supporting monarchies or military regimes, although it preferred to support leftist forces where this did not conflict with some immediate considerations. Unlike Washington, Moscow lost no time in appreciating the tenacity of Asian cultures, the strength of nationalism and the limits of Soviet influence.⁴ Initially, the Soviet Union had established itself in the area by backing those states suspicious of the West but by the mid-sixties it sought to broaden its ties. Therefore, it took a neutral position in the Indo-Pak war of 1965 and assumed the role of peace maker at the Tashkent Conference, convened in January 1966 at her own initiative. Yet, Moscow had no more success than Washington in establishing close relations with both Pakistan and India at the same time. The Bangladesh war in 1971 led the Soviet Union to give clear priority to its relations with India once again. The Sino-American rapprochement sparked Indian fears of a Sino-American Pakistani axis. It was promptly followed by the signing of a 20 year-Indo-Soviet Treaty in August 1971 and by the open Soviet support to India during the Indo-Pak war of 1971.

China's links with a conservative (and Islamic) Pakistan and the monarchy in Nepal are based largely on Peking's desire to counter India both because of Sino-Indian hostility and because of New Delhi's link to Moscow.

The US has worked closely with an authoritarian Pakistan but has found it difficult to establish firm ties with a democratic India. Though both share certain common values, India and America have alternately experienced inflated expectations and frustrated efforts at cooperation. The US, while friendlier to Pakistan than to India, gradually came to accept India's pre-eminent position and pivotal role in South Asia, particularly after the creation of Bangladesh. For a long time Washington refused to supply Pakistan with significant amounts of arms and thus challenge the regional balance of power. But the Afghan crisis brought the USA back to South Asia after 15 years. The Reagan administration decided to give 3.5 billion dollars worth of arms to Pakistan in the wake of Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, to India's discomfiture. The Afghan crisis and the Iraq-Iran war had considerably heightened American interest in this region. The result was that Pakistan again became a hot favourite and a front line state, and therefore, a part of America's strategic orbit against Soviet expansionism. But now in the post-cold war period the US approach to India and Pakistan has become 'even handed' and consequently Washington has acquired considerable leverage in South Asia.

The major West European states, whose official activities in the area are largely economic, have tried to work evenhandedly with the countries of the region regardless of their systems of government. Though Britain still remains a major trading partner of most of them and has the largest private investments in the area, its influence is showing a downward trend. Japan regards the subcontinent with considerable distaste and still shows no desire to assume more than a modest role.